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**TRACING THE PATTERNS:
BOYS AND THEIR LITERACY
IN THE EARLY YEARS**

Doctor of Education (EdD)

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ABSTRACT

TRACING THE PATTERNS: BOYS AND THEIR LITERACY IN THE EARLY YEARS

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The purpose of this ethnographic study is to uncover relationships between the development of masculinities, the acquisition of early literacy and classroom processes. These processes include the early stages of the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy. The focus of the study is to examine literacy experiences in the early years classroom with reference to current anxieties about the progress and achievements of boys. The setting is a medium-sized primary school in the North of England. Data are drawn from participant and non-participant observation of adults and children, informal interviews and conversations with adults and the use of a questionnaire as the basis for informal interviews with children. Evidence is presented which suggests that boys in the class are already beginning to develop negative attitudes to literacy; possible factors to account for this are considered. These include administrative organisation, differential teacher expectations of boys and girls, the development of masculine subjectivities into resistance and boys' avoidance of literacy experiences through coping strategies. The impact of the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy on the gendered acquisition of early literacy is given detailed consideration. Findings indicate that all these factors do have considerable influence on differences in children's confidence in their approach to literacy attainment. The paper concludes that, with regard to future school policies, there is scope for greater co-operation between teachers in exploring the connections between gender, literacy attainment and classroom processes. It proposes that such explorations should be focused on both girls and boys. It explores ways in which such discussions might be begun. It proposes some ways in which practice might be modified. Suggestions for further classroom research are also made.

Key words

Early literacy, gender, achievement, National Literacy Strategy.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Aim of the research

The aim of this project is to seek to make more evident the relationship between masculinities, classroom processes and the acquisition of literacy in the early years of schooling. The particular purpose of the research is to examine literacy experiences in the first two years of the Key Stage 1 classroom with reference to current anxieties about the progress and attainment of boys (Arnot et al. 1998, Barrs and Pidgeon 1998, Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority 1996, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1998). Here 'literacy' is defined as consisting of a set of social practices, the practices themselves being culturally founded (Goodman 1972, Heath 1983 Hall 1987, Meek 1991, Street 1984). This definition of literacy will be discussed in more detail below.

The fieldwork coincided with the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (Department for Education and Employment 1998). The immediate consequences of the changes in the teaching of literacy brought about by the Strategy and their implications for the learning of boys form an important part of the study.

Before going on to discuss these matters in more detail, it is important to consider some general issues concerned with boys' underachievement. These may not always be borne in mind in popular discussions, where all boys may be seen as underachievers (Redwood 1994, Kingston 1996, Grayling 2000, Garner 2000).

Who is underachieving?

Gender differences in levels of achievement in literacy are often seen to emerge in the early years of schooling (Barrs and Pidgeon 1986, Askew and Ross 1988, Arnot et al. 1998) and their effects may be long-lasting. 'Girls get off to a better start in Reading than boys; the lead they have established by Key Stage 1 is maintained at Key Stages 3 and 4' (Arnot et al. 1998, p.4). This statement

should be regarded with some caution. Arnot et al. are using a narrow concept of 'achievement' as measured by national testing. Even by this definition, not all boys are doing badly, but some groups of boys may be at special risk. As Moss and Attar (1999) state, 'Gender is by no means the only factor to keep an eye on. At the very least social class and ethnicity will cut across a straight gender divide' (p.135). Epstein et al. (1998) put the issue more strongly: 'Overall, the 'underachievement' of boys at school is a strongly classed and racialized phenomenon' (p. 11).

This being so, it is difficult to see why there are 'moral panics' (Millard 1997, p.45) about what *appears* to be failure on the part of *all* boys to reach national targets as efficiently as *all* girls. Skelton (2001) offers one explanation:

'The problem, quite simply, was that the idea of 'failing boys' provided politicians with a snappy soundbite and newspapers with banner headlines and in doing so instantly confined any appropriate discussion' (p.164).

She goes on to argue that part of the issue is a failure to acknowledge that statistical differences disguise a much more complex picture, as Barrs (1998) and Epstein et al. (1998) had already pointed out. *Some* boys and *some* girls are 'under-performing' as measured by national testing, though achievement gaps between female and male students at Advanced Level are statistically insignificant (Skelton 2001) and the acknowledged gaps that exist at the end of Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 English appear to be in decline (Gorard et al. 1999).

The 'boys versus girls' issue

The issue is not about 'boys versus girls', a confrontational situation with potential harm for both genders, but more one of particular groups of children, and individual *differences* within those groups. In some ethnic minority groups, both girls and boys are underachieving. This applies particularly to Bangladeshi

pupils. Boys from Caribbean and Pakistani backgrounds are also underachieving (Pulis 2000 cited by Skelton 2001). By contrast, Chinese and Asian Indian boys are doing well.

Achievement, social class and gender

The links between achievement, social class and gender have been argued in the literature over a period of many years (Lacey 1970, Willis 1977, Ball 1981, Mac an Ghail 1994, Skelton 2001). Broadly one side of the argument is that the more economically deprived the social class of the pupils, the more marked the gender differences will be, with more potential for anti-school behaviours. This may have implications for school achievement. Conversely the reverse side of the argument points out that the more economically privileged the pupils, the less obvious the gender differences are, with the opposite implications for school achievement. Gender and ethnicity are current discourses for considering achievement in school, yet social class is still one of the most important determinants of academic success (Mortimore and Whitty 1997).

Assessment and ways of working

Learning styles which may affect assessment and achievement have been considered as part of the equation. Arnot et al. (1998) argue that boys perform better than girls on multiple choice tests 'whatever the subject area' (p.36). They quote Stobart et al. (1992a) who speculate that boys may be better suited to multiple choice testing because they can avoid having to express themselves in language, sometimes in a language which is not their mother tongue, and have a more confident approach to decision making about what is correct. This is 'in contrast to girls who give greater attention to the relative rightness/wrongness of items' (p.36). Thus the means of assessment, as well as gendered learning styles, is a factor in measuring achievement.

Girls and boys may differ in their preferred learning styles, though there will also be differences within these groups. Skelton (2001) quotes work by Downes

(1999). He compared the 1998 and 1999 Key Stage 2 English tests. In 1998 pupils had to read a story and answer questions requiring reflection and empathy, the preferred learning style of girls (Millard 1997). In 1999 the reading test, by contrast, consisted of three passages about spiders. The text font was larger and was accompanied by illustrations and diagrams. There were some questions demanding responses in the manner of the 1998 test, but more marks were given for factual comprehension, the preferred learning style of many boys. Downes argued that this simple shift explained the 14% increase in boys' reading scores. He expressed concern that, if the 2000 tests were similar to those of 1998, boys could be disadvantaged again and thus be seen as under-performing.

As early as 1990, Barrs had pointed out the dangers of testing to discover levels of 'achievement'. She had advocated the assessment of 'normal behaviour in favourable circumstances' (p.40) and attention to differences in assessment which, it could be argued, could be laid at the doors of gender, ethnicity and social class.

The complexity of the general situation is summarised by Epstein et al. (1998). Rejecting simplistic analyses, they state:

'...the discourses in which debates about the schooling of boys have been framed are both narrow through the ways in which the terms 'achievement' and 'education' have been understood and masculinist in style; ... it is unhelpful to set up a binary opposition between the schooling of girls and that of boys... questions around equity and differences among boys and among girls as well as between boys and girls are key to understanding what is happening in schools' (p.4).

Adult achievement in the workplace

There are many paradoxes which cloud any discussion of boys and their schooling. It is difficult to understand the source of their later success, if their failures in school are so dramatic. Equal numbers of men and women gain university places, yet men dominate the professions, including those where women workers are in the majority, for example education. Actual access to university places has not changed a great deal in the last decade. 'Both sexes have more than doubled their levels of participation' (Arnot et al. 1998, p. 18). Arnot et al. go on to note that this participation is overwhelmingly from the middle classes.

Men also dominate professions where literacy is primarily important, for example law and journalism (Alloway and Gilbert 1997). No matter what the work or profession, men earn more than women in the workplace. For example in the field of primary education more women may be employed as part-time or temporary staff and men may find promotion to higher paid posts less difficult.

There is however another aspect to discussions about male employment. This concerns the number of unemployed males who would formerly have sought work in manual labour. With the contraction of heavy industry, for example steel making, shipbuilding and coal mining, such jobs are fewer in number. The part of England where this research took place is particularly badly affected. Some children have never seen their fathers and elder brothers in employment. In some areas male and occasionally female unemployed young persons can cause problems in terms of vandalism and crime, sometimes presenting a direct threat to their older neighbours. It could be argued that the threat presented by this 'underclass' played a part in the formulation for change at the end of the twentieth century. Raphael Reed (1998) quotes as evidence:

'...the placing of gender at the heart of state actions: the 'out of control' and uneducable boy is in need of reining in; the

parent at home, oftentimes the single parent/mother, is made responsible for and penalized for his actions' (p.64).

Times change

The Education Reform Act of 1988 changed education in basic ways. The emphasis moved from child-centredness, equal opportunities and social justice to 'the concept of education as a means of enabling individual aspirations through the rough justice of market forces' (Skelton 2001, p.16). Schools had been places where the difficulties of some boys in acquiring literacy in the early years had sometimes been neglected. Cohen (1998) puts this into historical perspective, referring to a 'habit of healthy idleness' (p. 19). Teachers had clung to the belief that most boys would catch up in later years, their failures being extrinsic to themselves and the difficulties of some of them just a matter of 'flair' (Epstein et al. 1998). Now each school became a market stall which was obliged to prove that its wares were better than those on the stall next door. Within the related discourse, Barrs (1998) drew attention to the publication of school league tables and the 'current close focus on assessment, measurement and monitoring' (p. 2). If schools were to meet their targets for English in Key Stages 1 and 2, they must now find ways of encouraging more boys to acquire literacy faster than before.

This brief summary of assessment issues has served to raise some of the general problems concerning the achievement of boys. I shall return to them in more detail later. What follows is a personal statement setting the context for the project.

A personal statement

I am female and in late middle age. My experience as a teacher of young children stretches back to the early 1960s. Throughout my teaching career my dominant interest was in the acquisition of literacy. I was particularly concerned with the teaching and learning of reading and how this learning related to classroom processes. This deep interest linked with my own pleasure

in reading. I have no memory of not being able to read and I have used reading as pleasure and refuge all my life.

My curiosity about boys and their literacy stretches back for almost twenty years. In the late 1970s I was teacher in charge of a large nursery class in an infants school in the North of England. The school served an area of overspill housing with much male adult unemployment. The nursery operated an 'open house' policy and there were strong links with parents, mostly mothers, though some fathers did attend nursery sessions. Without exception these fathers refused to work with the children. Instead they mopped floors, carried outdoor equipment and offered to mend things. The men were quite open in their explanations of why this happened. Firstly they did not wish their manhood to be called into question, since 'minding the children' was women's work. Secondly they were afraid that too close a contact with the children might be thought to be verging on the criminal. I was absorbed by the ways in which the four year old boys and girls from the school's economically disadvantaged catchment area reflected the gender patterns they saw around them every day. I began to notice differences in the ways in which some girls and some boys approached learning.

I was fortunate in that in 1982-3 I acted as co-ordinator for a project sponsored by my employing LEA and the Equal Opportunities Commission on 'Sex Differentiation in the Early Years'. The brief was to examine disadvantage for girls in six nursery establishments. I had some involvement with the feminist movement and my ideas were firmly fixed on enhancing opportunities for girls. I spent six months observing three to four year old children and their teachers in six differing nursery establishments.

In spite of myself, my interest was caught by the learning patterns of boys. These patterns formed the sub-text of the Project Report (1984). Boys spent their time at a physical distance from adults. They seemed to have already developed marked curriculum interests rooted in science and mathematics.

These were expressed in construction and in sand and water play. Their avoidance of adults meant that they did not select themselves for ad hoc story groups and literacy events (Heath 1983). Under the influence of a strong and thoughtful LEA adviser, such literacy events formed the basis of literacy teaching in this context at this time.

Nursery workers, who were all female, used different kinds of discourse with boys and girls. When they intervened with boys, they either managed behaviour or spoke in ways which, it might be argued, were designed to support learning, the process described by Vygotsky (1978), which Bruner (1988) called 'scaffolding' (p. 89). Unfortunately I had no interview data that might have told me why this happened, or even if the adults were aware that it was happening. With girls, adults relaxed into more social kinds of talk. Girls were careful to stay near adults and join in the literacy events they led. There is an example from the data (Hodgeon: unpublished data, 1984) of an adult talking to a boy as he floats a plastic duck. She discusses the depth of the water and the weight of the duck. In contrast, the same adult comforts a distressed girl by remarking on her pretty shoes and assuring her that her brother never cries. This episode ends with the girl and the adult sharing a story. For the first time, I saw the school creating and reinforcing masculinities and femininities as well as accepting the curriculum bias the children had already acquired.

The report of the project, under the title *A Woman's World?* (1984), was published jointly by Cleveland LEA and the Equal Opportunities Commission. I was able to follow up my interest in boys and literacy in further study through Diploma and MA courses, and more recently as a member of a National Task Group (SCAA 1996).

I continued to ask myself the questions *why* and *how*. I had started with three year olds, and it seemed logical to follow up what I had found there in different ways. After a brief study of five year old classes in two schools for a Diploma course at the London Institute, where I came under the influence of Margaret

Spencer, I studied a small sample of parents constructing literacy along with their eight year old children. The data gathered for this project formed the basis of my MA degree (1990).

The present project returned to the Key Stage 1 classroom in an attempt to throw more light on still unanswered questions. An examination of the literature suggested two areas for investigation, which drew together possibilities for answering some of the questions I had been asking myself. It seemed that these emerging themes were open to data collection techniques which could provide a way forward. One theme was concerned with the literature of masculinities:

- *How does the development of masculinities in young boys affect their literacy learning in the early years of schooling?*

The other took account of changes in the teaching of literacy; it attempted to link the first question with more specific classroom processes:

- *What are the implications of the National Literacy Strategy for the issues of gender and literacy in the early years?*

Context of the study

The study took place in a medium-sized primary school in an area of recent urban development in the North of England. I have called the school Bankside. The school has provision for mainstream children of three to eleven. In addition, there is provision for children with special needs, including some with sensory impairment. The school operates a policy of inclusion. Children with special needs are taught with support in mainstream classes.

Concluding note

This introduction has outlined my personal experience and interests, as well as providing a more general setting for the project in terms of current thinking and

theoretical frameworks. In my next section I shall go on to discuss the literature in more detail.

Chapter 2 Boys and their literacy: a theoretical review

My purpose in this chapter is to trace and then summarise the current state of research into boys and their literacy. I begin by providing a short history of the controversy surrounding what may loosely be called 'Boys and English'.

Boys and English: a brief history

From 1970 onwards feminist researchers such as Spender and Sarah (1980) addressed the ways in which the education system, as an enforcement agency for social prejudices, may foster gender inequalities. Educational institutions were seen as sites where inequality was endemic and constantly reinforced (Deem 1980, Weiner 1985). It was argued that, at primary level, boys and girls were treated differently. Girls were encouraged to be passive, dependent and anxious for approval, whilst aggressive behaviour in boys was tolerated as natural and expected (Askew and Ross 1988). Because of their more troublesome behaviour, teachers spent more of their time with boys (French and French 1984).

In particular, attention was focused on the lack of opportunities for girls in science and mathematics (Spender and Sarah 1980, Skelton (ed) 1989). As a result, initiatives directed at improving the achievements of girls in these subjects were set up, for example *Girls into Science and Technology* (Whyte 1986). It could be argued that these initiatives have met with some success (SCAA 1996).

Early developments with regard to gender and literacy came as the result of struggle on the part of the feminist movement supported by practising teachers. The resulting equal opportunities policies were linked to the desire to 'improve economic efficiency and to increase social justice' (Open University 1995 p.

35). A parallel cause was the professional place of women in education (Spender and Sarah 1980, Steedman 1987).

Some general initiatives towards equal opportunities came from teachers and their local authorities in combination, as for example in Cleveland (Thompson 1989). The Inner London Education Authority's thrust towards equality for all social and racial groups included literacy as part of its policies, but this was unusual. Mathematics and science formed the basis of much anti-sexist work.

Paradoxically the evidence for gender differences in mathematical achievement in primary schools was conflicting. The National Child Development Study of seven year olds found that girls' performance in the solving of mathematical problems was significantly worse than that of boys. The Inner London Education Authority Junior Survey (1986), by contrast, found no significant gender differences in written or practical mathematics in the same age group. There was a generally agreed finding that girls' superiority to boys in literacy was established (Assessment of Performance Unit 1983, Inner London Education Authority Junior Survey 1986). Boys slowly became the focus of anxiety.

It is important to consider how this anxiety has come about. Unlike feminist work in the early eighties, its origin was not the result of grass roots movements and scholarship. Rather it has been fed by a rising sense of panic manipulated by the 'New Right' (Stierer 1991), focusing on the teaching of literacy in primary schools (Turner 1990, Alexander *et al.* 1993). In 1993 the Office for Standards in Education published a report, *Boys and English*, which remarked:

'There are contrasts in performance and attitudes towards the subject. The majority of pupils who experience difficulty in learning to read and write are boys' (p.2).

In 1996 the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority set up a working group to consider what was becoming a political problem. In 1996 the Group published an information pack, *Boys and English*, followed in 1998 by *Can Do Better*, a series of case studies with suggestions for practical interventions to support boys in literacy.

In contrast to the facts and figures demonstrating some boys' poor performance in literacy as compared with girls and the effects of their different classroom behaviour on achievement, work on *why* this might be so has been slower to emerge. 'Gender differences in classroom *processes* are therefore present but their significance for educational *performance* is not self-evident' (Arnot et al. 1998 p.26, original emphasis).

Based on the experiences of teachers, parents and children, *Reading the Difference* (Barrs and Pidgeon 1993) was an early contribution to this debate. In their introduction to this volume the editors expressed the need to move away from simple text analysis and conjecture towards a more complex examination of how children were learning to read in gendered ways. Analysing primary grade testing in an Australian context, Alloway and Gilbert (1997) provided another strand. They pointed out the differences *within* gender groups and noted the relationship of achievement to economic factors. They argued that children are placed in a paradoxical situation. They see literacy prioritised within the school doors, but treated with a lack of respect beyond them.

Against this general background, which sets the scene for the theorisation of the 'Boys and English' controversy, I shall now go on to discuss one of the most difficult of the surrounding issues.

The 'feminisation' of education

Epstein et al. (1998) theorise one aspect of what has become known as the 'feminisation' of education in terms of three common discourses. The first of these they call the 'Poor Boys' discourse. In this discourse boys are seen as

victims, objects of pity at the mercy of feminists, mothers and above all, women teachers. Epstein et al. quote Gilbert (1998) in summary:

‘Poor boys, lost boys, damaged boys, under-fathered boys.
Boys at the mercy of feminist teachers; boys being
outperformed by girls; boys who have not been allowed to tap
into what Don and Jeanne Elum (1992:17) call ‘the moist,
dark , mysterious call of the masculine soul’”(p. 6).

Within this discourse, remedies for boys’ underachievement in school include the promotion of aspects of the curriculum designed to catch their interest (Clarricoates 1987a, Millard 1997). Parallel emphasis on teaching styles, such as the fostering of competition which might further boys’ learning, is also favoured. This should be seen in the context of competition in the system as a whole (Mahoney 1998), both between schools and internationally. ‘Mentoring’ systems, which are designed to offer successful male role models, are also being offered. These latter are not without their critics (Raphael Reed 1998).

The ‘Poor Boys’ discourse is linked to men’s rights movements, which Jackson (1998) calls ‘politically reactionary’ (p.78). He goes on to state: ‘It is also a covert way of reintroducing unequal gender relations between boys / girls and men / women’ (p.78).

A second discourse surrounding the feminisation of schooling is defined by Epstein et al. as ‘Failing schools: failing boys’. Here they discuss the globalisation of the discourse over the developed world, stating:

‘In the British context it forms the linchpin of much
educational policy under New Labour, building on the
policies of the previous Conservative government’ (p.8).

Here the key is the failure of schools and thus the failure of boys to prosper. This discourse is linked with versions of 'school effectiveness'. Epstein et al. go on to argue:

'The two models are somewhat different, but share some important characteristics: they are both undertheorised in relation to issues of inequalities...they are technicist and managerialist in their approaches to schooling; their primary reference point is competitiveness in the global economy; and their primary method is constant testing, often associated with league tables of successful and unsuccessful schools' (p.8).

The 'Failing schools: failing boys' discourse is expressed in military metaphors, ringing with the language of hegemonic masculinity, for example 'targets', 'hit squads' and 'action zones' (Epstein et al. 1998 p.8).

The third discourse, which Epstein et al. argue to be of 'globalized common sense status' (p.9), is that of 'Boys will be boys'. Here there is sympathy for boys, whose hegemonic masculinity is expressed in fighting and aggression. The fighting and aggression are seen as a given, not open to change (Connolly 1995). Connolly studied a sub-group of boys at the beginning of the school system. Identified by their teacher as the 'Bad Boys', this young group, the majority of whom had Afro-Caribbean origins, maintained its identity by aggressive behaviour in school as well as by a devotion to popular culture. Connolly supports Mac an Ghail's (1994) findings with older boys. He too points out the fluid nature of the children's experimentation with the discourses of adulthood, including resistance. As part of this discourse, poor achievement at school is seen as extrinsic to boys themselves. Epstein et al. summarise:

'Indeed,...there is a tradition which claims that boys' very lack of attainment at school is evidence of their superior powers of intellect' (p.9).

The 'Boys will be boys' discourse is still alive and well in schools, as I shall show in the following section.

Feminist contributions to debates about boys and their literacy

Research interest in gender and literacy began as part of feminist debates about anti-sexist approaches to work in schools after the passing of the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. The focus of the discourse at this time was on the education of girls and the ways in which they 'experienced an unequal and discriminatory education in relation to that received by boys' (Skelton 2001, p. 16). Initially discussion about literacy was centred on texts and questioned balances of female and male characters, as well as sexist story lines (Zimet 1976, Loban 1977). It was with the work of a few women, often working alone and for academic purposes, that more complex studies of gender and literacy began to emerge (NATE 1985, Barrs and Pidgeon 1986, Minns 1993).

An important parallel development was taking place. This had begun with ethnographic enquiries into schools, the emphasis being on social inequalities. It could be argued that, at the time of these studies, it seemed natural to base them in boys' schools (Lacey 1970, Ball 1981), particularly since the researchers were men. With the rise of the 'Men's Rights' movements, as described by Lingard and Douglas (1999), the focus changed. It now moved onto the study of masculinities and schooling, 'masculinities' being defined here as 'the multiple ways of being and becoming 'male'' (Skelton 2001 p.5). These later researchers, for example Walker (1988), Abraham (1995), Mac an Ghaill (1994), developed complex ways of observing and theorising ways in which developing masculinities affected boys as school learners. At about the same time, scholars began to consider the development of femininities in relation to education and society (Walkerdine 1990, Hey 1997, Miller 1996). An important emphasis centred on the work and professional aspirations of girls and women teachers (Delamont 1987, Apple 1988). Autobiography played a prominent part here, whether written or spoken (Steedman 1985, Nias 1988).

In the early 1980s a body of research had emerged concerned with what Buchan (1980) had summarised as 'a good job for a girl (but an awful career for a woman)' (p.81). Posited on the largely female workforce in primary education, it sought to explore the patterns of power within schools. The teaching staff often consisted of a large group of females, which was managed by males. Walkerdine (1985) drew parallels between mothers and female teachers. Writing specifically within the 'development of the child-centred pedagogy', she stated that:

'Teacher training in primary schools has developed in relation to the amplification of women's capacities for child-centred nurturance' (p.209).

Steedman (1987) contributed to this theoretical framework, pointing out the links between nursery and schoolroom, the whole leading towards a pedagogic drive for empathy with the child.

With the help of Nias (1988), teachers began to find their own voice. Working with both women and men, she reported what it 'feels like' to be a primary teacher. Her longitudinal study found that boundaries between personal and professional lives were blurred. Relationships with children became an extension of family life. The result was an enhancement of emotional empathy with children in school. Nias points out that her large sample was biased. It consisted of teachers who were enthusiastic and successful. There was no evidence from the bored or unhappy. The effects of differences in status between male and female teachers (Wiles 1983, Windass 1989) were ignored.

Since the late 1980s some things have changed. Women have increasingly sought power in schools and in administration. More of them have become head teachers and deputies. At the same time attacks on the child-centredness described by Walkerdine (1985) have increased. Barrs (1998) considers that a sub-text of government initiatives in literacy 'can be seen as a reaction to the

feminisation of education' (p.6). Miller (1996) and Epstein et al. (1998) support this argument. Teachers, mothers and feminists are blamed for the failures of boys.

It could be argued that part of the reaction against the feminisation of education has been a shift in focus away from the authoritarian male head teacher, whose word was unquestioned law. He has been replaced by yet another level of male management. It is now central government, supported by a system of punitive inspection, which orders the detailed practice of a predominantly female teaching force through such initiatives as the National Literacy Strategy (Department for Education and Employment 1998).

One aspect of the early years classroom does not change. The central adult figures, as well as support staff and parent helpers, are usually women. A recent body of investigation sets out how children explore models of masculinity and femininity in early and later childhood and how these explorations might affect their relationships with their teachers. Mac an Ghaill (1994) made a pioneering study of one male secondary school. He was able to identify strong cultural sub-groups amongst the students. Each had differing and well-defined attitudes towards work and behaviour. Students' male heterosexual identities were not fixed. They were socially constructed, fragile and changeable. Jordan (1995) draws together all these ideas about the developing masculinities of young boys. They see themselves as 'Not-girls', not feminine...being male is primarily doing things that cannot and should not be done by women' (p.75). To put this another way, being male and very young includes *not* doing the things that women do, including the woman who is your teacher.

Experimentation with the discourses of adulthood is the key to the work of Thorne (1993). She made a study of two American middle-school playgrounds, noting variations in the way children were experimenting with gender identities. She makes the point that children influence adults in various ways: 'children act, resist, rework and create: they influence adults as well as being influenced

by them' (p.3). Here is a crucial discourse. The relationship of girls and boys with teachers is interactive. Abraham (1995), cited in Arnot et al. (1998, p.60), indicates how gender value systems may be polarised in secondary schools. Anti-school behaviour may result, with inevitable impact on academic performance. The effects are particularly marked in the English curriculum, as I shall now go on to show.

Reading and writing in the early years: boys, girls and their literacy

The family

Literacy is not confined to schools. Schools reflect the patterns of literacy in society (Barrs and Pidgeon 1998). In support Barrs quotes Solsken (1993), who saw the learning of literacy as a 'self-defining act'. This self-definition included gender. If they lived in a reading culture which was female and middle class, including such behaviours as immobility and silence, boys avoided it. If they lived in a reading culture in which males took no part at all, they were unlikely to adopt that culture as part of their self-definition.

In my own work with the parents of Year 3 children (1993), I found that, within the small sample of six families, four parents suffered from low literacy (Purcell-Gates 1995). These parents defined their problems as having difficulties with 'being like everybody else' and 'having to pretend you can read when you can't' (Hodgeon, unpublished data 1993). Three of these parents were male. One of these three males was teaching himself to read in order to apply for a job as a gamekeeper. All the remaining males in the sample read either DIY publications or what they described as 'war comics'. The boys in families with adult low literacy all had difficulties with reading and writing in school, even though their parents were desperate to help them. Interestingly the girls in the same situation were making good progress.

Now that the sex of the foetus can be revealed before birth, gendered experiences can extend to life in the womb. As Grieshaber (1998) remarks,

‘Parents can then actively construct the foetus as a gendered identity’ (p. 15). It is not surprising therefore that ‘even before school age, girls and boys already show understandings of gendered social orders’ (Danby, 1998 p.178).

In the nursery classroom boys show a tendency to avoid adult-centred activities such as self-selected story groups (Hodgeon 1984). Girls, on the other hand, spend much of their time near adults. Boys keep at a distance, working with science-based materials. It seems that their curriculum choices are already made (Browne and Ross 1991, Hodgeon 1984). As Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) state, ‘There seems to be an abrasive rub between boys, literacy and schooling’ (p.197). Questions of control arise here. Listening to story and taking part in other literacy events demand some form of self-control, for example sitting still or holding a pencil (Alloway and Gilbert 1997). Boys who are socialised into noise, activity and dominance may not be willing to submit to these constraints.

The apparent male rejection of the English curriculum was considered by Millard (1997). She studied the reading habits of boys in the first year of the secondary school. These boys thought that being good at school work and English in particular was a feminine attribute and to be avoided at all costs. Millard went on to argue that the fault lay within the English curriculum which did not provide enough of the material that boys enjoy, for example non-fiction texts. Moss (1998) argued that to accept this was too simplistic. She agreed with Meek (1996), who pointed out that distinctions between genres were not always easy to make. Further, no questions were being asked about *why* some boys seemed to prefer non-fiction.

There is every reason to suppose that gender value systems are operating in the lives and classrooms of very young children. Walkerdine (1987), Pidgeon (1998) and Barrs (1988) have noted them in private and public contexts. Browne and Ross (1991) have explored the ways in which young girls in nursery and infant classrooms operate in terms of gender. Children as young as three have clear ideas about which materials were suitable for boys and which

for girls. Even when children operated outside their own domain, they tended to adapt their use of materials to suit their gender subjectivities. A good example is what happens when a mixed group of children use Lego. In general boys will build cars and other transport items, girls will build houses and furniture. In my own (1984) work, I found that girls in the nursery spent much of the time near adults, joining in the literacy activities which interested these same adults. Boys avoided adults and therefore the literacy activities in which they were occupied. Literacy was fast becoming a 'girls' thing', to be avoided by boys. Solsken (1993) highlights this dichotomy:

'Sharp divisions between manual and mental labour often intersect with gender divisions so that mental labour...is seen as 'effeminate', the pejorative connotation of the adjective showing the devaluation of activities assigned to women' (p.43).

To summarise, the developing gender identities of young boys may run counter to the gendered contexts of the classroom. Learning, and particularly the learning of literacy, may seem to them a feminine interest, which as 'not-girls' they see little reason to pursue.

Theorising literacy

In the discussion which follows I shall use Street's (1984) definition of literacy as 'a shorthand for the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing' (p.1). In addition I shall adopt his analysis of the two main approaches to the theorisation of literacy, first considering the concept generally discussed under the heading of the 'autonomous' model.

Apologists for the autonomous model of literacy (for example Greenfield 1972 and Goody 1977) make the following claims:

- literacy affects the cognitive processes of individuals;
- literacy development is associated with the spread of civilisation;

- literacy development is associated with individual liberty and upward social mobility;
- the consequences of literacy development in a society include economic success and the development of cognitive skills which would otherwise be neglected, for example ‘abstract context-free thought’ (Greenfield 1972 p.169).

Greenfield (1972) explicitly links the development of ‘abstract context-free thought’ with the teaching of literacy in schools.

Street (1984) critiques the autonomous model in the following ways. Firstly he contends that supporters of the autonomous model are alarmed by opponents who argue that all societies share basic functions such as logical and abstract abilities (Labov 1969). They are alarmed because, if this is the case, the enormous amounts of money spent on public education in western societies become difficult to justify. Street contends that public education serves other ends as well as the fostering of logical and abstract abilities, for example ‘social control, transfer of dominant values’...(p.19). In this way the autonomous model is constructed ‘for a specific political purpose’ (p.19).

Secondly Street goes on to attack the concept which he calls the ‘great divide’ (p.24). This is the theory which makes distinctions between communities in terms of intellectual differences which are ‘sufficiently deep and of sufficient significance to warrant, at least in a literate society, the continued emphasis on schooling and the acquisition of literacy’ (Hildyard and Olson 1978, p.5 cited by Street 1984, p.28). Street bases his attack on distinctions between communities expressed in terms such as ‘logical/pre-logical, primitive/modern and concrete/scientific’ (p.24). He argues that the evidence on which the use of these distinctions is based is flawed. Much of it is based on mistaken ideas about what was being said and done. He states that ‘Too often all that is at fault is the observer’s understanding of what other people’s actions and statements mean’ (p.25). To support his argument, Street quotes the work of sociolinguists, for example Labov whose seminal work was first published in 1969 and has

been reprinted many times, for example in 1988. Labov, who analysed the ghetto speech of New York and found it to be as rule-governed as Standard American speech, contends that logical thought exists in all societies.

Thirdly Street associates the autonomous model with the ‘‘essay text’ form of literacy’(p.1). He attacks the essay text convention as a ‘narrow, culture-specific literacy practice’ (p.1). This form of literacy is associated with literacy practices in schools and universities. It privileges the literacy of the few over the literacies of the many. Street quotes as an example the literacy of factories, where being able to take account of warning notices, signing names and compiling lists might be more important (p.41).

Street (1984) proposes, as an alternative to the autonomous model, an ideological approach to reading and writing which stresses ‘their inherently *social* character and embeddedness in larger *social* practices’ (Lankshear 1997 p.2, original emphasis). Lankshear quotes Gee et al (1996) as he notes the difference between the two approaches. ‘On the traditional view, literacy is seen as a largely psychological ability - something to do with our ‘heads’. We, on the other hand, see literacy as a matter of social practices - something to do with social, institutional, and cultural relationships’ (Gee et al. 1996 p.2). The ideological model may be summarised in the following ways (Street 1984 p.2):

- the focus is on the social practices of reading and writing;
- ‘the ideological and therefore culturally embedded nature of such practices’ (Street 1984 p.2) are recognised;
- advocates of the ideological model note that participants in literacy events construct literacy as part of their lives in many different social settings, often outside educational institutions;
- the model treats claims for the consequences of literacy with some scepticism and investigates these claims in terms of the resulting social control over the many by the ruling elite;
- the model rejects claims for a ‘great divide’ between oral and written forms of communication.

In order to illustrate the working of the ideological model, Street describes in some detail the important work of Heath first published in 1982. (The page numbers given below refer to a 1988 reprint). Heath describes ‘ “ways of taking” meaning from the environment’ (p. 22). Her ethnographic work with three different communities in the Carolinas of the United States had led her to identify and to compare three very different ways in which pre-school children did this. ‘Mainstream’ children, whose mothers were practising or experienced teachers, learned to pay attention to books from a very early age and were socialised into question and answer routines which prepared them for the ways of taking meaning which would later be part of their school experiences. One of their most significant literacy events was the bedtime story. Heath’s account of how children take meaning in Mainstream families will be familiar to many readers who grew up in similar communities. Heath complains that, by contrast, ... ‘little is actually known about what goes on in story-reading and other literacy-related interactions between adults and preschoolers in communities around the world’ (p.22). The work she conducted in Roadville, a white working class community, and in Trackton, a black community, goes some way towards re-dressing the balance.

In Roadville parents taught their pre-school children by reading to them and asking questions. Book choice was largely confined to alphabets, animals, nursery rhymes and Bible stories. Children are were taught to give correct answers to questions:

‘Thus, in Roadville, children come to know a story as either an accounting from a book, or a factual account of a real event in which some type of marked behaviour occurred and there is a lesson to be learned. Any fictionalized account of a real event is viewed as a *lie*; reality is better than fiction’ (p. 31, original emphasis).

Heath points out that such ways of taking meaning constrain Roadville children in the later years of primary school when creativity and independence are required.

In Trackton babies participated fully in the life of the household, except when they were asleep. Even then it is likely that close human contact would continue. There was no regular bedtime, so there was no bedtime routine and no bedtime story. Babies and toddlers lived in the middle of constant noise from television and radio as well as conversation from their adults. Reading materials designed for children were absent (p.32).

Heath identifies three stages in the learning of speech and language in Trackton. The first is the repetition stage. Here toddlers pick up and repeat chunks of speech from the adults around them. Adults do not involve themselves in the toddlers' speech at this stage. The second stage Heath calls 'repetition with variation'. Here the children insert 'chunks of language from others into their own ongoing dialogue, applying productive rules, inserting new nouns and verbs for those used in the adults' chunks' (p.33). In the third stage children begin to take part in the adult conversations around them. They attract adult attention in non-verbal ways by, for example, tugging at adult clothing. At this stage adults accept and respond directly to the child, beginning to listen to and evaluate its stories. Heath comments:

'They do not decontextualize; instead they heavily contextualise nonverbal and verbal language. They fictionalize their "true stories," but they do so by asking the audience to identify with the story through making parallels from their own experiences' (p.37).

Trackton children are thus not prepared for the ways of meaning which are demanded of them when they move into schools. Heath goes on to remark that 'the majority not only fail to learn the content of lessons, they also do not adopt

the social interactional rules for school literacy events. Print in isolation bears little authority in their world'(p.37).

Heath's work illustrates the different ways in which young children are 'taking meaning' from their communities. She points out that, in the same small geographical area, children are learning to speak, read and write in many different ways. She also draws out what this might mean as children bring these different literacies into 'mainstream' schools. Heath's ethnographic work in these three communities thus illustrates in detail Street's (1984) ideological model of literacy.

Reading and writing in school -classroom approaches

Lankshear (1997) points out that, until the 1970s, 'Notions of reading and writing as specific (cognitive) abilities or sets of skills based on an identifiable technology (e.g. alphabetic script) held sway within educational theory and practice'...(p.2). Cook-Gumpertz (1986) summarises this concept as 'a twentieth century notion of a single, standardised school literacy' (p.22). This school literacy assumed a concept of teaching and learning in which neutral skills and knowledge were transmitted from the teacher to the pupil. Hall (1987) summarises:

'The fact that reading and writing were perceived as visual/perceptual processes, and that they had to be taught in a systematic and sequential way, enabled the creation of an elaborated set of rules governing the order in which these relationships had to be taught. Once rules were clearly expressed, the teaching of these rules became an activity akin to a science, understood by most teachers to be a neutral, value-free activity. Thus, by applying the rules in a systematic way, children were inevitably supposed to become literate' (p.3).

These ideas held certain attractions for teachers and administrators. Administrators could test children and calculate if the large sums of money devoted to education were matched by gains in literacy scores. Teachers retained close control over what were seen as the ways and rates of learning. Children had few responsibilities, except to follow the lead of the teacher, whose power was enhanced.

Children are considered to have little prior knowledge or literacy culture of their own before the age of school entry. At the age of five they are then subjected to an artificial system of breaking language down into small pieces (Goodman 1972). Children are assumed to be ignorant about literacy, though their experiences may be profound and will differ with their home culture (Heath 1983, Kress 1997, Minns 1997, Gregory 1997). The knowledge they already have is considered unimportant when teaching strategies are being devised (Street 1984). In this way teachers are seen as the possessors of expertise from which others, including parents, are excluded (Purcell Gates 1995). It is assumed that at the end of the teaching process children will be able to read, but that boys will read differently and not as well as girls (Jenkinson 1940, Millard 1997).

As the rules for literacy learning became 'more and more complex and elaborate so the specialist nature of literacy teaching was confirmed...As few children were capable of coping with this myriad of specialist-created skills, so the belief in children's literacy incompetence was reinforced' (Hall p.3).

Initial or emergent literacy

By the early nineteen eighties alternative ideas had begun to develop. Researchers had begun to note that children were not waiting until they went to school before beginning to read and write (Clay 1982, Goodman collected in Gollasch 1982, Smith 1982). In 1984 Goelman, Oberg and Smith edited a wide-ranging volume, an account of a symposium at the University of Victoria,

Canada in which was described what was becoming known as 'initial' or 'emergent' literacy. Goodman (1984) described the new thinking in this way:

'It slowly became obvious to me that children's discoveries about literacy in a literate society such as ours must begin much earlier than at school age. Becoming increasingly aware of the significance of social context and with a developmental view of learning, I hypothesised that children develop notions about literacy in the same way that they develop other significant learnings. That is, children discover and invent literacy as they participate actively in a literate society' (p.102).

Children control and manipulate their own literacy learning. The teacher moves from centre stage into partnership with parents on terms of equality (Taylor 1999, Hannon 1995). Essential here is the way in which literacy practices are married to concepts of self (Zimet 1976, Barrs 1988, White 1990). Notions of literacy are tied to ideologies and are never neutral and value-free.

Linked with these ideas is the concept of children approaching school with ideas of 'what counts as literacy' (Meek 1988). These will be founded on what Heath (1983) describes as 'literacy events', for example helping to write shopping lists, sending and receiving greetings cards and sharing written texts with others. I found that boys are likely to have had less of these experiences in the home with a male role model (Hodgeon 1993), but Moss (1998) disputes this. Her findings indicate that 'in the vast majority of households both men and women read and see themselves as readers' (unnumbered page).

Most children will have experienced other kinds of text: watching television, playing videotapes and sharing computer games with others. Within these experiences children position themselves by gender. Barrs (1988) describes a young child sustaining a play sequence based on television cartoon characters

over several days. She comments: 'His deep involvement may be part of a process of asserting his own sexual identity' (p.112).

The changes in research focus outlined above were seminal in leading to some differences in the way literacy was viewed in some schools. The young child was increasingly seen as an emergent speaker, reader and writer, learning the craft both at home and at school. Contexts were familiar and literacy was used for clear purposes, reflecting the culture of the child.

Parents were increasingly seen as the child's first literacy teachers and the conviction that home and school should work together became important. Parents were actively recruited as helpers in the classroom (Stierer 1988, Hannon 1994). As Stierer was careful to state, there were some problems in terms of organisational tasks for teachers. The focus on those parents who were able to act as volunteers, rather than on the parental group as a whole, caused difficulties. Male parents found it difficult to enter the classroom as helpers. In spite of these problems many parents and teachers achieved partnership status, with more extensive support for children's literacy. This was often significant for boys in that parents began to see the importance of sharing texts with them at home (Hodgeon 1993).

Parallel changes had been brought about by enquiries into the linguistic basis of literacy, based on a growing knowledge about the acquisition of oral language (Halliday 1978). Hardy (1977) had emphasised the importance of narrative in the teaching of literacy. Bennett (1979) Waterland (1988) and Holdaway (1979) gave it practical emphasis. Waterland (1988) was particularly influential in producing accessible material for teachers based on her own practice. It could be argued that sometimes the practical realities of the classroom were neglected (Edelsky 1996). Most research depended on the particular linguistic intimacy of parent and child, as Dombey (1992) argued in a detailed study of one mother and her child. Gregory (1992) pointed out the difficulties of transferring this intimacy into other contexts and relationships.

It was Smith whose work in 1971 and 1978 had provided the most widely recognised contribution to the study of initial or emergent literacy. A surge in INSET courses run by local authority advisers led to some early years teachers adopting his ideas. The National Writing Project (1987), later documented by Czerniewska (1992), which worked towards young children creating their own sustained texts, provided added stimulus. This approach had a considerable influence on the Orders for English in the National Curriculum (1989). In 1990 all these ideas were drawn together by Willinsky, describing the result as the 'New Literacy':

'The New Literacy consists of those strategies in the teaching of reading and writing which attempt to shift the control of literacy from the teacher to the student' (p.6, original emphasis).

Willinsky wrote at a time when the 'new literacy' was already under attack. In spite of public impressions to the contrary (Turner 1990), its presence in schools was not widespread. Some teachers had never adopted it, having no substantial knowledge of the literature on which it was based. Sometimes the new literacy was mixed in with the old (Sarland 1995). Even though schools which did adopt the approach had made serious attempts to explain it to parents, many of these remained confused and unconvinced, especially in deprived areas where literacy had traditionally provided a 'way out' (Sarland 1995). Head teachers were not always understanding, especially if their teaching experience had been with Key Stage 2. In their experience the transmission model had at least demonstrated that somebody was doing something.

This idea was linked with a functional concept of literacy (UNESCO 1970). Here a literate person had been defined as someone who:

‘has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community and whose attainments in reading, writing and arithmetic make it possible for him to continue to use these skills towards his own and the community’s developments’
(cited by Oxenham 1980, quoted by Street 1984 p.183).

The effects of concentrating on such a concept of functional literacy may be exemplified in a conversation I had in the late 1980s. At about this time, in reply to the question ‘What (in terms of literacy) do you want these children to learn?’, my head teacher replied, ‘I want them to be able to fill in their tax forms.’

In 1990 the Department of Education and Science published a report from Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (Department of Education and Science 1990) stating that success in reading was linked to mutually understood policies, low teacher turnover and thoughtful parental involvement, and had little to do with the methods used in the classroom. In spite of this, it was methods that became the focus for attacks on teachers by politicians and others on the ‘New Right’ (Sarland 1995). These attacks focused in particular on the use of ‘real books’. Stierer (1991) points out that critics of ‘standards’ in reading, for example Turner (1990), were attacking the new literacy. They often had their own agendas and, by skilful use of the national press, manipulated statistics for their own purposes.

‘Moral panics’ (Millard 1997, p.45) ensued. The result was political action in the form of the National Literacy Strategy (Department for Education and Employment 1998). For the first time since the beginning of compulsory schooling, *models* and *methods* are prescribed for the teaching of literacy in primary classrooms. For example the Literacy Hour through which the Strategy is delivered is divided strictly into shorter periods of time during which children

will be taught specified materials in whole class or smaller groups (DFEE (1998). The assumption here is that 'children will be taught' (p.18) is the same as children learning. Hilton (1998) points out that a return to this prescribed simple model will not suffice: 'Both language and children confound such preconceptions. They are both, as it were, alive: difficult and slippery' (p.5).

The Director of the Strategy, in an interview with Reid (1997), appeared to agree: 'Children need to be taught using a full range of strategies and any attempt to polarise this is counter-productive and not in line with the evidence' (p.6). In practice, there is heavy reliance on teacher-child transmission, with up to forty minutes instruction of the class group by the teacher from the earliest years of schooling. Reading is heavily privileged over writing, and talk hardly emerges at all, though we are promised that 'The pattern of teaching reading is a highly discursive one' (Reid p.6). Alloway and Gilbert (1997) had already noted the dangers of privileging one set of literacy practices over others, with consequences for the achievements of boys.

Having provided a general introduction to the National Literacy Strategy, I shall now move on to discuss the wider aspects of discourse and gender identity, beginning with the work of Vygotsky (1978).

Language, learning and literacy

The foundations of the study of spoken language and its links with learning were laid by Vygotsky (1978), whose work took place in Russia in the nineteen thirties. His concept of learning is culturally based, with knowledge shared and understood. Meanings are made in social rather than individual ways. His experiments were constructed in an effort to re-define the behaviourist concepts of his day (Mercer 1994). The experiments of scholars such as Piaget (1926) began to be discredited at around the time that Vygotsky's work was becoming widely known in the West. Donaldson (1978) was a leading critic. She and her co-workers managed to establish that the results of many of Piaget's experiments hung upon the *form* of the questions asked, rather than on the

substance of the questions themselves. Heath's (1983) insights into the foundations of literacy in cultural practices owe much to Vygotsky, as do later studies, such as those of Tizard and Hughes (1984), Tizard et al. (1988) and Edwards and Mercer (1987).

Wells (1987), in an influential longitudinal project with many subjects, established a complex model of spoken language. He traced interactional patterns of utterance and response. He contended that more of this complex kind of talk took place at home than at school. Specifically rejecting gender as a contingent factor, he made instead large claims in terms of context and culture. Maybin (1994) re-examined his interactional model with older children as they talked informally with each other through the school day, for example in the playground. She found that they were able to support each other's knowledge and understanding in the way that Wells had described. Grugeon's (1988) analysis of playground singing games had already stressed the support that five to nine year old girls gave each other by offering acceptance within the social group, since such games are 'child initiated and mediated' (p.132).

Also of relevance to the present research are the links Wells makes between success in the early stages of literacy and the experience of sharing stories (Wells 1987). Here he makes three main points. Firstly, it is in this way that children are enabled to gain familiarity with the experience of 'the sustained meaning-building organisation of written language and its characteristic rhythms and structures' (p.151). Secondly, children can extend their experience beyond their own surroundings. 'In the process, they develop a much richer mental model of the world and a vocabulary with which to talk about it' (p.152). Thirdly, the sharing of narrative between adult and child enables the child 'to explore his or her own world in the light of what happens in the story and to use the child's own experience to understand the significance of the events that are recounted' (p.152).

Purposeful talk between children had become a significant focus for study. Foreman and Cazdan (1985), using Bruner's (1985) terminology, concluded that children could 'scaffold' each other's learning in recognisable ways. Children moved from their own viewpoints to consider the position of others, achieving a 'broader overview' (Open University 1995). The work of the National Writing Project (1987), written up by Czerniewska (1992), encouraged children to make critiques of each other's writing, providing support and a sense of audience. Similar American work by Dyson (1987) traced the support young children can give each other in writing tasks, though she pointed out that the role of critic can be problematic for the shy and inarticulate. Fisher (1993) also sounded a note of caution about peer-group talk, pointing out that boys tend to dominate mixed-gender groupings and choose gender-biased tasks for themselves.

Tizard and Hughes (1984) found that girls in school were reluctant to ask questions, and that their talk was more complex in the home. Their study may be criticised for excluding boys. They later (1991) defended this decision on the grounds that girls speak more, and more clearly, than boys. They pointed out the need to curtail sample size. It seems likely, however, that their study lost more than it gained in choosing girls alone.

Edwards and Mercer (1987) worked with junior school children in a structured setting. Their work demonstrated that talk between teacher and children consisted largely of attention to school-based discourse routines, which in their view obscured the children's learning. Heath (1983) and Michaels (1981) observed children learning the same kinds of routine from differing cultural viewpoints and with similar results.

Fairclough's (1989, 1992 and 1995) work built on previous studies of spoken language embedded in differing social situations (Halliday 1978, Heath 1983). For example Deem 1980 and Weiner 1985 considered educational institutions where gender inequalities were endemic and constantly reinforced. Earlier

ethnographic enquiries into secondary schools emphasised social as well as gender inequalities. Considerations of patterns of power within primary schools had pointed up imbalances between male managers and female teachers. Walkerdine (1985) had made close comparisons between mothers and teachers of young children. Working on school discourse routines Edwards and Mercer (1987) had found that such routines obscured children's learning.

Writing from an overtly socialist political perspective, Fairclough was interested in how some participators in 'speech communities' (1992, p.37) establish domination over others. In classrooms for example, boys have more speech turns than girls and the teacher determines who shall take the floor (Swann and Graddol (1993).

Fairclough's work is concerned with change. He argues for change in the patterns of power in discourse, not only in schools but in such settings as medical consultations and police interviews. He contends that 'critical language awareness' (1992 p. 2), should be taught in schools as an essential entitlement '...especially (for) children developing towards citizenship in the educational system' (1992 p.3). In Fairclough's view, critical language awareness studies would increase knowledge of how language works to perpetuate the domination of some individuals by others, and would eventually bring about a more equally balanced set of interactions.

Children are initiated into these conventions in school and, as Willes (1983) notes, that initiation may be long and hard. The powerful adult is the person who knows what the 'approved roles' (p.82) of the conversation are. Willes demonstrates how we all learn these conventions:

'...teachers were, like everyone else, once school pupils...the rule governed structure of the interaction between teacher and learner is a culturally transmitted fact, like the language itself' (p.82).

Some children may seek to disrupt the 'rule governed structure'. Studying gendered language, French and French (1984) observed a Year 6 classroom and concluded that a small subset of boys was adept at claiming the class audience and the teacher's attention by introducing bizarre and interesting items into the discussion. Millard (1997) offers some support, noting that secondary pupils adopt a controlling male discourse, which often has sexual elements. Swann and Graddol (1993) analysed the videotaped materials used earlier by Edwards and Mercer (1987), in order to trace how boys maintained their dominance. They found the teacher's behaviour to be crucial. Largely through glance, the teacher controlled who answered questions, and most glances were directed at boys. We have no indication as to whether the science-based content of the lesson might have influenced teacher and children.

These wider aspects of discourse and gendered identity have their impact on the interaction between child and text. Meek (1988) for example has explored the relationship between reader and text. Illustrated by experiences of adult and young child reading together, her conclusions have a social and cultural bias. Lewis (1990 and 1996) has expanded this work. He describes how children engaging with picture books experiment with illustration and print, absorbing what is 'not said' in order to be able to make sense of the text. Appleyard (1990) calls this relationship with text 'play'. Emphasis is placed on the cultural contexts in which reading takes place, including that of gender.

Early research in gender and literacy was confined to studies of images in texts. 'Text' was narrowly defined. Zimet, in her 1976 study of picture books, comics and 'schoolbooks', had demonstrated a heavy preponderance of male characters with active lifestyles, whilst the role of females was to observe and support. Loban (1977) based her work on reading schemes where girls were passive and docile, whilst boys were domineering and demanding. Harland (1985) examined the Ginn 360 reading scheme, then in use in 85% of UK primary schools. She listed the many activities of boys. Some were unlikely, for

example piloting helicopters or helping workers on building sites. She set these in apposition to those of girls, which included washing clothes and doing housework. Arguing that such rigid division of role portrayal was damaging *for both genders*, she quotes Stones (1983): ‘children’s books have an important part to play in the way children view themselves in the male or female role’ (p.33).

Barrs and Pidgeon, in their 1986 study of gender and reading, point out that boys are never seen to be sitting quietly and reading in texts, and so such secretarial images of themselves rarely become part of their self-concept as readers. In addition, as Holden has remarked, ‘You can’t read a book when you are riding a bike’ (Holden 2000, unnumbered page). Since then authors, publishers and editors have become more conscious of this imbalance and have provided more varied images. It is often argued that images in books are not as arresting for young children as those multi-media texts which are part of popular culture (Hilton 1996, Barrs 1988, White 1990). These multi-media texts are decidedly gendered.

Work by Davies (1987) and Davies and Banks (1992) has probed more deeply into the complexities of reading and gender image. Working with reception age children, Davies found that they constructed their own meanings from books which broke traditional conventions. The children’s constructions and the messages in the stories were in conflict. They brought their own meanings to the texts. This might lead to an assumption that stereotyped images are perhaps less important than was thought. It had long been known that boys and girls were interested in different kinds of reading materials (Jenkinson 1940, Assessment of Performance Unit 1983).

Moss and Attar (1999) examined how children were using books of different kinds in Key Stage 2 classrooms. They explored gender preferences for fact and fiction in relation to the social activities taking place within the reading curriculum. Where a ‘reading ladder’ (p.142) was constructed, reading was

linked with reading proficiency, for example when graded primers were in use. Boys retreated from this 'choice' into non-fiction texts which were not organised in an hierarchical fashion. Low-achieving boys were able to share texts which depended on illustrations to convey meaning. Moss and Attar argue that, by doing this, boys were avoiding the difficulties that assessment might bring in terms of facing up to their possible difficulties with reading proficiency. It is at this point that the literature of reading and its relationship with gender images begins to diminish and my own research begins.

What follows is a detailed examination of assessment which returns to some of the issues already discussed in my Introduction. This takes the form of a survey of the controversies of the last thirty years related to the measuring of achievement.

Assessment and early literacy: from the Primary Language Record to SATs

The assessment of literacy has been fraught with disagreement since the beginning of compulsory schooling. Barrs (1990) has outlined some of the controversies in the assessment of English since 1970. The decade from 1970 to 1980 had marked the beginnings of the 'Great Debate' introduced by James Callaghan who articulated what he saw as a publicly felt need for accountability in schools. Barrs (1990) outlines the ostensible reasons for the 'accountability movement':

'...the main reasons publicly given for the need for greater accountability were generally three: the need to ensure that education was giving value for the money that was being spent on it; a concern about standards; and a feeling that the content of the curriculum had become too exclusively the concern of the professionals' (p.5).

Concern about 'standards' quickly became a feature of the 'Great Debate'. In the United States, 'value' for the large amounts of money invested in education programmes had not been easy to demonstrate. The point was neatly made by Lapointe (1986), quoted by Barrs (1990). Noting that expenditure on education had increased both at State and Federal level, he went on to remark:

'Media commentators, the legislators and parents want to know what has happened as a result of these expenditures and efforts and why is the current concern over education so serious. What has the American public gotten for its money? Our natural response to this query is to test children, teachers and the system and find out the current status.' (Lapointe (1986), quoted by Barrs (1990) p. 6).

There is a hint here of the emotive nature of the argument, as well as the simplistic terms in which it grew to be expressed. The link between input and output had been made and was to grow in importance over the following decade.

This did not happen without differing voices being heard in this country. The Report of the National Curriculum Task Group on Assessment and Testing (1987) was published before the National Curriculum itself. TGAT took the view that assessment should be, above all, formative. Barrs (1990) was one of those who agreed:

'True formative assessment can be a very positive influence on teaching and learning. It provides a visible record of development which can help children and teachers and can be the basis for a fruitful dialogue with parents' (p.7).

She was not alone. At about this time I remember being a member of an LEA-wide task group which sought to introduce teachers to the practices of

formative assessment through a document and INSET sessions. The National Association for the Teaching of English, which was Barrs' joint publisher for her 1990 work, had long been active in the field (Stibbs 1981).

In producing *The Primary Language Record Handbook* (1988), Barrs and her colleagues at the Centre for Language in Primary Education had followed strict principles. These were listed as: attention to context, the assessment of process as well as product, the sharing of assessment criteria with children, and attention to equal opportunities for all. *The Primary Language Record* was designed to provide in-depth assessment of the individual literacy patterns of children. Dissemination was careful and widespread and was the basis for developments in the assessment practice of many teachers.

However all sophisticated thinking was now about to be overtaken by market forces. The American input-output model took over. The implementation of the 1988 Education Reform Act led directly to the adoption of summative forms of assessment, some of which harked back to the derided methods current in the days of selection for secondary education, the '11 plus'. Barrs points out that, once quantitative data was available in the form of test scores, it was inevitable that it should come to dominate:

‘Whenever an assessment is expressed in terms of a score, grade, or figure of any kind, there is always the danger that this measure will take on a life of its own...Moreover, when assessment is expressed numerically this tends to encourage the belief that those things that cannot be reduced to numbers do not really count’ (p.8).

By adopting the language and philosophy of the market place and setting each school in direct competition for clients with its neighbours, the Act made publication of summative test results inevitable. ‘League tables’ giving the SATs scores of schools, but not those of individual children, meant that schools

could be directly compared with each other. They were first published for the secondary sector in 1994 and for primary schools in 1996 (Department for Education and Skills, Schools Performance Tables <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/performance/tables>). Just as in the days of selection for secondary education, parents began to choose for their children those primary schools with the 'best' scores.

Arrangements were made for the widest possible inclusion of children with statemented special needs, and the most recent QCA document setting out special arrangements for tasks and tests for 2003 emphasises that 'Disapplication should only be necessary in very exceptional circumstances' (p.43). Supportive measures include the provision of large print and braille tests (p.23), though there is no mention of hearing impairment or the need for signing. Teachers, in consultation with parents, are given the responsibility for decisions as to the disapplication of individual children. They are required to do this by taking account of set criteria.

The debate became even more emotive when teachers' pay was linked to children's performance in the 'league tables'. Familiar patterns began to emerge. The SATs tests began to dominate the curriculum in some schools. These tests were described (DES 1989) as 'a combination of externally-determined standard assessment tasks...and teachers' own assessments' (p.6). With so much at stake in terms of pre-set targets, good OFSTED reports, the preservation of numbers and indirectly of teaching posts themselves, it was not surprising that teachers should remodel their teaching to fit the tests. It could be argued that the curriculum was narrowing towards teaching what was to be tested.

In an article in *The Guardian*, Russell (2002) attacked SATs on two fronts. Suggesting that 'hundreds of teachers cheated in last month's standard attainment tests', she argued that these put 'schools and pupils under intolerable pressure and that the results can't be trusted' (p.17). Here once more the ghost

of the eleven plus walks, though it should be remembered that now testing reaches back as far as six and seven year olds.

Russell supports her contention that the results are doubtful in value by noting that they are not reflected in the results of other national testing:

‘Durham University had conducted annual vocabulary, reading and maths tests on 5000 year 6 children since 1997. Unlike the dramatically improving SATs test results, the Durham results haven’t changed, with the exception of modest improvements in maths’ (p.17).

In addition the scores in NFER reading and maths assessment tests for Year 6 and Year 7 are unchanged, and have remained so for the last four years. Russell argues that this is because government figures regularly overestimate the number of children who are reaching ‘target’ levels. At the same time, children are being coached intensively for the all important SATs tests.

Here I should like to support these arguments from my own experience as a teacher of young children and as a visitor in the same school with the equivalent age group. These remarks apply to Key Stage 1 SATs. I should warn that this was one teacher’s experience in one school, and it may not be possible to generalise. In this way it cannot be part of a general critique of the National Literacy Strategy, and further research would be needed to establish what is happening in other settings. The remarks are offered as an illustration of some of the things that happened to children, teachers and the curriculum after the introduction of SATs in one primary school.

Children

The school has provision for children with special needs including sensory impairment. As already reported, the school’s policy is one of inclusion. This policy reaches back to the school’s opening. Initially all children were entered

for Key Stage 1 SATs, including those with special needs. The percentage rate of 'achievement' for Key Stage 1 as a whole was thus not high, particularly in comparison with neighbouring schools. There was some movement of mainstream children to these other schools over a period of time. Eventually the decision was taken to disapply some children from SATs.

Teachers

The introduction of SATs took place in a notorious muddle, for example individual assessment in science typified by the floating and sinking task. TGAT had encouraged the idea that all assessment was to be formative, but, as Barrs (1990) states, it still recommended that each child should be graded on a scale of 1 to 10 from the age of seven. At first teachers believed that the tests were 'snapshots', as they had been assured. They were conscious of the dangers of 'teaching to the test'. I remember many personal conversations on these lines.

Again teachers were overtaken by events. They might not have approved of 'teaching to the test' initially, but it became clear that in the narrowest of senses it worked. Older persons remembered being coached for the 11 plus in quite overt and specific ways. In terms of thinking and learning it was jumping through hoops, but the pressures were such that they felt they had no alternative. For example I remember, as a classroom helper, being asked to coach children in the art of filling in forms in the manner of some parts of the English tests. Having a choice, I offered to read a story whilst the teacher filled in forms.

My evidence suggests that teachers took no pleasure in coaching children in this way. In staff room conversations they continually complained about having no time to talk to children, to 'have a laugh', or to provide more interesting and fulfilling curriculum experiences. The word in frequent use was 'grind', set in contrast to what used to happen in the past.

Curriculum

As reported above, the curriculum has narrowed even for the youngest children. Market forces enshrined in the 1988 Act place emphasis on the teaching of what is directly measurable. In contrast, 'The qualities that are valued by employers and by individuals - co-operation, creativity, persistence, problem solving aren't being encouraged or recognised' (Russell 2002 p.17). In curriculum terms this might include large areas of the humanities and the arts as well as young children's fundamental need to play.

It could be argued that the increasing number of children reported to have behaviour problems may be the result of the pressures they experience in school. For example I saw nursery children copying a daily sentence into exercise books and listening to story in whole class groups, a demand not made in the past until later in their school careers. Their responses were varied and often gendered, more boys than girls beginning to resist. Russell (2002) reports eleven year olds' responses to Key Stage 2 SATs in terms which are very familiar: 'I'm hopeless at times tables', 'I'm just useless. I got a three'. Making children feel hopeless and useless may be one of the first steps to behaviour problems.

Summary: where are we now?

Strands in the literature may offer some explanations of gendered achievement in literacy. The female culture of the early years classroom may have significance for the literacy of boys. Concepts of masculinity and femininity exist from a very early age, with possible effects on the personal relationships between teachers and children. Boys may see literacy as a feminine pursuit. They may see their fragile concepts of masculinity threatened by too close an interest in books and learning. This strand in the literature provided the basis for my first research question. Much of the literature which has the study of masculinities as its basis is wide ranging, but reticent about the detailed effects

of gendered development on literacy learning. My first research question was focused on this problem and sought to be both descriptive and explanatory:

- *How does the development of masculinities in young boys affect their literacy learning in the early years of schooling?*

The ways in which literacy is taught are linked with social context, including the context of the classroom. 'New' models for literacy, which reach back to beginnings of universal schooling, have been introduced in order that 'standards' may be visibly 'raised'. The imperatives guiding this are political (Hilton 1998).

Research on the links between talk and learning has led to investigation into the kinds of talk taking place in home and school settings. Teachers address more of their talk to boys than they do to girls. School discourse routines, with their implications of role and power, are an essential lesson that must be learned.

There is a wide range of texts available to children. Differences exist in the ways girls and boys process texts. Gender images in texts have been shown to be less important than was thought, since children construct their own meanings from the texts they encounter.

National assessment has pointed up attainment differences in literacy between girls and boys, and between groups within each gender. Race, class and special needs may lead to additional bias. *How* assessment is carried out may be crucial.

The last thirty years have shown a consistent pattern of the return to summative assessment. This form of assessment reflects political attitudes towards education. It is a powerful force for change.

The history of gender in education shows different approaches to work with girls and boys. Work with girls was initially concerned with a wide range of curriculum subjects, the result of initiatives by women teachers and academics. Work with boys has been the result of political initiatives and is chiefly to do with English.

The introduction of a centralised and detailed curriculum for literacy offered the opportunity for an examination of the issues of gender and literacy in the early years. My second research question therefore makes explicit reference to the National Literacy Strategy and the opportunities it gave the researcher for the description and explanation of classroom processes:

- *What are the implications of the National Literacy Strategy for the issues of gender and literacy in the early years?*

With these strands in the literature firmly in mind, my next task is to describe how I went about gathering the data for the project.

Chapter 3 Methods and methodology

Research strategy and methods: rationale and relationship to research questions

The research was designed to answer questions about young children, their teachers and their lives together *in the classroom*. The classroom processes involved in the teaching and learning of literacy and their relationship with gender were the specific focus. The research strategy was therefore aimed at gathering a body of data based on the following:

- the effects of boys' experiments with masculine subjectivities on literacy learning;
- the particular ways in which literacy is taught and their possible implications for the literacy learning of boys.

I decided to use an open-ended ethnographic strategy to identify some answers to my questions. I did this with some reservation, being conscious of the 'ambivalent status' (Hammersley 1992, p.1) which some aspects of such a strategy hold even internally (Atkinson and Delamont 1985). I decided to use an ethnographic strategy for the following reasons:

- I was anxious to base my research on direct observation with attention to the viewpoints of adults and children (Ely et al. 1997, Denscombe 1998).
- I needed the research to be grounded in real events. For this reason I needed to consider that I might be asking the wrong questions. The two research questions were the foundation of the study, but I tried to keep an open mind as to where they might lead. Miller (1997) sets a worthy example. She describes how her research focus changed as her observations continued:

‘I thought I would be drawn to other issues more strongly...But over and over my log kept coming back to the

marginalised student...What had gotten him there?...Why was I located on these questions, both as a participant observer and a teacher?' (p.28).

It was only through careful consideration of questions like these that she was able to modify her research design and move into this unexpected part of the study.

- I hoped that the data would be complex, subtle and intricate and would provide the basis for the development of theory.
- I wished to remain aware of *myself* in choice of topic, planning, presence in the classroom and writing up.
- At the same time I wished to have as little impact on the setting as possible.

(adapted from Denscombe 1998 pp.79-80).

Access

I was fortunate in having the choice of two settings. A friend, the head teacher of a large primary school in the area, invited me into the school in which she worked to do my research. Though grateful for her invitation, I decided against working in this setting for two reasons:

- It would be apparent to the teachers with whom I sought to work that I was closely allied with the head teacher. She was and is a personal friend of long standing.
- The school served part of a very large development of private housing. I was interested in working with a slightly more mixed social population.

I knew that the school in which I had worked for some years and where I was known both as teacher and researcher would offer ease of access. Though slightly more distant than my other possible setting, it was still within reach in terms of resources of time and energy. Measor and Woods (1991) hold that the building of relationships and trust are crucial to the quality of qualitative research. I considered that a setting where I had worked as a volunteer since my retirement and where my relationships were already secure with some teachers,

children and importantly, parents, would have some advantages. This was in spite of Schofield's (1993) warnings against selecting a site on the basis of 'convenience or ease of access' (p.99). Conversely, Lacey (1993) is not sure that a researcher needs to be totally outside the culture of the setting. He suggests that a relationship where the researcher is already known:

'...seemed to me to call for a specific approach to fieldwork requiring sympathy, naïveté, openness, a willingness to help where possible, and an ability to let people talk' (p.116).

Initial entry presented no difficulties. The new head teacher was sympathetic. I was given the freedom to work in Key Stage 1, though I was careful to seek the consent of individual teachers, after outlining the project to them in general terms. I was given what could only be described as an enthusiastic welcome by the Key Stage 1 team leader:

Research Journal

Pam greets me with hugs and kisses. She invites me to do 'anything you need'. She offers general help with data gathering should I not be able to get to school. She offers to make videotapes and so on. 'We'll all help'.

I am charmed by these promises which I think were made in good faith. My doubts are not about this, but are concerned with the pressure of work all teachers now suffer. They haven't got time to do other people's work.

On a more professional level certain guidelines were agreed. Observation and interview data would be shared with informants on a person-to-person level. These informants would have some control in that they could veto the use of any material with the exception of the Research Journal, though I made it clear at this stage that interviews would be transcribed and that these transcriptions

should be considered as 'on the record'. Every effort would be made to ensure strict confidentiality between participants and in any resulting documentation.

Setting

Bankside is a medium-sized primary school in a development of mixed public and private housing. It lies at the edge of a conurbation in the North of England. The majority of parents work in manual occupations and live in pleasant public housing. Some are unemployed. There are a few professional families. The teaching staff, with the exception of the head teacher and one teacher of the deaf, is female.

The school originally opened as a pioneer enterprise with large and generous provision for mainstream pupils aged three to eleven. Also within the building was a resource centre for children with moderate learning difficulties, a class for children with disturbed behaviour, and provision for children with sensory impairment. The aim was to integrate all these special needs children into mainstream provision with appropriate support. There was also community provision with two full-time workers.

As in all institutions, there have been changes. The community provision has disappeared. A further mainstream school has opened in the area. Numbers have fallen. The class for children with disturbed behaviour has gone. The other special needs groups remain. To some extent they render the school atypical, though it is increasingly common to find children with special needs integrated into mainstream provision in primary schools. This has implications in terms of generalisability, though there is one great advantage. Children are used to numbers of adults working together in the teaching area. Persons with notebooks cause no comment from the children.

There were other possibilities for bias in the sample. All the teachers were Caucasian. In the class I chose to study there was one Chinese child with basic English and one child with special needs who was Asian. She spoke fluent

English. The area was mixed in terms of social class, with some mainstream children from private housing. These children's parents worked in such professions as teaching and local government. By contrast the majority of the children with special needs were bussed in from other areas. Their families were more likely to belong to less advantaged socio-economic groups than those of the mainstream children.

In addition the presence of children with special needs within the classroom meant that the provision of adults, both assistants and teachers, was generous in comparison with that of mainstream schools. The philosophy of inclusion led to special needs experts working with mainstream children and mainstream teachers working with special needs children on a daily basis. These arrangements and their possible effects were a frequent subject for discussion between the adult participants.

The school and its community

The social contexts of this area of England have some influence on any discussion of gender, schooling and literacy. Skelton (2001) points out the importance of local context for the development of masculinities in the inner urban environment in which her work took place (p.82). Bankside was not an inner city school, though it shared two characteristics of inner city institutions.

The more important was that it acted as a citadel (Purcell-Gates 1995). Although parents were encouraged to come into school, physical barriers were put in the way. All the doors except one were locked at 9 a.m. After this time, the only access was through a door leading from the car park monitored by closed circuit television and controlled by the school secretary. *I found this intimidating and imagined that, as a parent, I would have to feel that my message was very important for me to brave such barriers.* These precautions were understandable in view of traumatic events in recent years which have led to the deaths of teachers and children at the hands of intruders. Yet they marked the school off as a different place and isolated it from the community it served.

Within the school there was 'clear demarcation between school and 'outside' behaviour' (Skelton 2001 p.83). Children were reminded to speak in 'inside voices' and reprimanded for 'that kind of behaviour *in school*' (field notes, original emphasis). It is possible that, although the young children in the sample could not express the idea, they may have been conscious that their homes and community were being unfavourably compared with what went on 'inside'.

Teachers did call into question some of the things which children were allowed to do outside school, and the expression of their disapproval formed the subtext of many staff room discussions. The subtext was based on perceived lack of discipline and the ways in which parents would support children against teachers. For example:

Research Journal

KS 1 Christmas Concert Day

Teachers, assistants and children have been working for some weeks on this most important public production of the year.

State of high excitement as children are helped into costumes, mice, sheep, donkeys, other animals. Parents have been queuing for places in hall since 8.30 am. At registration Michael is not present. At 9.15 am he arrives with his mother. She has complained before that he doesn't like singing or taking part in the concert. Michael is scowling. His mother says that yesterday his mouse tail was confiscated and he hates being 'bossed about'.

Staff counter that his behaviour during rehearsals has been unacceptable, hence the removal of the mouse tail (he tried to put it round the neck of a smaller child, telling her she would be strangled). Michael's mother says she doesn't care and she takes him home. Staff scandalised, tell the story at break to

other colleagues who tut in sympathy. School adults feel all their work ignored. I feel some solidarity with them, but know they are angry because 'outside' has struck back and won.

The other sense in which the school shared some characteristics of inner urban institutions was in terms of some of the children's views of education and the linked issue of their future employment. The area has been a centre of decline in heavy industry for many years. Adult male unemployment is high when compared with the remainder of the country. Some children are accustomed to seeing fathers and elder siblings at home. One refuge for young men is military service. Jonathan was almost six when he told me his life ambitions:

Research Journal

Y1 Jonathan and work

This afternoon the SEN support teacher baked cakes with a group of children. The rest of us went for a walk in the locality, to talk about different kinds of houses. I walked with Jonathan.

J. My brother's got a gun, he's in the army when I
grow up I'm going to get a gun

JH What do you want to be when you grow up? Do
you want to be in the army?

J. I'm going to do nowt

JH You could be a pilot or a cook

J. I'm going to do nowt.

In her comparative study of gendered behaviours in schools in the inner city and in more middle class areas, Clarricoates (1987b) found that a similar disregard for the future was one of the characteristics of her conversations with boys in inner urban areas. In contrast, most children in more prosperous areas of her study had a more optimistic view of the future.

Choosing the sample and its unexpected difficulties

My original plan was to work with a Year 1 class for one school year. I chose this age group because the children would be settled into school routines and would have made a start in school-based literacy, but would not have reached the stage of national assessment. I hoped to build on three years of co-operation as a classroom helper with a Year 1 teacher. Additionally the children would be familiar with me from seeing me around the school in the role of classroom helper. It proved impossible to carry out this straightforward plan for the following reason.

In September 1998 with the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy, organisation in Key Stage 1 of the school changed radically. Children in Years 1 and 2 were grouped by ability for the Literacy Hour itself. For this hour of the day any child in Year 1 might well be taught in a mixed age group by someone who was not their class teacher. If I was to base the study on the experiences of a whole class, it was clearly difficult for me to follow them when they split into smaller groups taught by other teachers. I considered my alternatives.

The only class working with their own teacher for the Literacy Hour was the Reception class (Year R) which entered the school that September. The class had 32 children, including two pupils with sensory impairment. These children were supported by two classroom assistants. Since it was now impossible to carry out my original plan, I decided to base the study with this class, planning to move on with them into Year 1 when the time came. There were some advantages. The Reception class teacher and I knew each other well and my relationship with her was friendly, though we had never worked together either formally or informally. I would be able to follow at least some of the children through into Year 1, giving some longitudinal data. I could observe the initiation of the children into school routines and discourses (Willes 1983) and the beginnings of school-based literacy. Disadvantages included the fact that interviewing children would be difficult, since four year olds *conduct* rather than respond to conversation. In addition this particular group was not balanced

in terms of gender, boys being in the large majority. I could also sense that there was an unusually wide spectrum of development. I discussed these problems with the teacher. She was encouraging and agreed to work with me as a researcher in her classroom in exchange for some negotiated teaching support. I outlined the project in general terms to her, and gave the assurances about the sharing of data and its confidentiality outlined above.

The children entered full-time schooling in September 1998. All of them had had their fifth birthday by February 1999. The majority had spent three terms as part-time pupils in the school's nursery. I spent the first year of the project observing and talking to them and their teacher as they worked together, as well as offering some teaching support. The ethical agreements already agreed were continued.

By September 1999 the organisation of children in Key Stage 1 had changed again. Year 1/ Year 2 classes were now grouped as follows:

Class G.: Year 1 'less able' children, total 32.

Class M.: Year 1 'more able' children plus Year 2 'less able' children, total 30.

Class P. : Year 2 'more able' children, total 31.

Judgements of 'ability' were made by teacher assessment. A majority of the Year R children I had already worked now moved on into the 'less able' Year 1 class. I continued to work with them with the permission of their new teacher on the same conditions that I had previously negotiated with the Reception teacher. The children's new Year 1 teacher had three years' experience and was working on a temporary contract. Data collection took place on an average of one day per week in term time from September 1998 to March 2000. I was the sole researcher.

Methods of data collection

Observation

The first method was observation as a participator in the normal setting. In this role I offered support as occasional supporting teacher. At the same time all the adults who worked in the classroom were aware of my role as researcher. The securing of parental permission was more difficult. The head teacher decided that it was not necessary to do this by letter, so it had to be done on an informal basis through personal conversation before and after school. I asked all adults not to share information about my status as a researcher with the children. Of course I had no assurance that this request had been carried out.

The second method was in participation as observer. Occasionally I withdrew into this more formal role, typically when observing whole class teacher-led sessions.

I chose not to use observation schedules, because in the past I had found them limiting. Walker and Adelman (1993) agree. For example in their comments on Flanders' System (1970), they warn that, though useful in 'formal' situations, it 'contains an implicit theory of instruction' (p.3). If used in other situations, the system may disguise the complexity of classroom interactions and behaviours. The development of theories may be obstructed. Classroom interaction may be studied without attention to context, and the viewpoints of teachers and pupils may be neglected (Delamont and Hamilton 1993).

Observation has its own problems, including threats to validity and confidentiality, difficulties with sampling, bias arising from limited ways of recording, and possible distortion to the social pattern. In addition, where there is a sole researcher, it presents a picture seen through one pair of eyes.

Threats to validity

Where there is an observer working alone, validity may be threatened. Unless the observer discusses her notes with at least one other person,

misunderstandings may arise. The researcher may focus wrongly on events which tend to agree with her own picture of things, offering a biased scenario. There may be simple error, as in the following example:

Field notes

Y1: *Practising classroom observation*

I ask Kelly to read to me. Kelly appears, no book. I ask her to fetch it. She fiddles about at a side table. Time passes. Is she just avoiding the task? Eventually appears with book. Five minutes since asked to read. Later talk to Mollie (SEN support teacher) saying K. appears to be reluctant reader. Mollie says this possible, but what I describe is routine devised by Debbie (class teacher) - Kelly was making a note of the title of the book she was about to read to me. She just needed more advanced warning.

Here an accurate interpretation of events was only established by checking with another adult *who was familiar with the context*. It is this element of triangulation which may guard the validity of accounts.

Even with these precautions, it is possible that observers may disagree, even though they have witnessed the same event. Ely et al. (1997) provide vivid accounts of the same happening written by different people. They are careful, though, to differentiate between interpretation and untruth: 'Our belief is that, while the field is a construction, it isn't a lie' (p.18). It is this concept of *construction* which must be borne in mind by researcher and reader.

Threats to confidentiality

When data are shared, confidentiality is at risk, especially in a project using a small sample. Discussion of data is limited to individual informants. A mutual decision may then be reached as to whether a particular piece of data reflects a fair picture of happenings (Walker 1978). In this way informants have some control over the data they have provided.

Difficulties with sampling: where to observe

Ball (1993) emphasises the importance of 'naturalistic sampling'. He points out that the behaviour of adults and children is not the same in different parts of the setting. Much can be learned from observing children and parents in the cloakroom or in the playground (Thorne 1993). Teachers may cast aside their teaching 'persona' at coffee time in the staff room (Hammersley 1984).

Difficulties with sampling: when to observe

Time influences the conduct of affairs in early years classrooms. It may also be important for the behaviour of teachers and children. At the beginning of the school year there may be tensions as children and teachers negotiate what kind of classroom this is to be (Pollard 1984). At the end of the school year adults and children relax in a different atmosphere. Personal worries may cause stress for children and adults at any time. Inexperienced teachers and those on temporary contracts may be especially threatened. OFSTED inspections and SATs tests may give rise to serious anxiety in both adults and children.

Children are now required to sit quietly for long periods of time. Most of this class teaching takes place in the morning. By lunch time young children may be tired and fractious. By the end of the week the effects may be magnified. For these reasons a note of the time and day of the week is useful.

Difficulties with sampling: who to observe

This is one of the most 'complex aspects' (Ball 1993 p.38) of sampling. Ball argues that the researcher should bear in mind the complex social networks operating in educational settings:

‘...these networks, as far as teachers are concerned, form around subject specialisations, age, ethnicity, gender, shared social interests, religious affiliations and seniority’ (p.39).

It should be remembered that Ball is discussing secondary establishments: networks in the primary school may be somewhat different. For example, the most obvious for adults may be the 'us' and 'them' of those who teach Key Stage 1 as compared with those who teach Key Stage 2. This is a subtext to social relationships, rather than a barrier; for example in the sample school it was the practice for all staff, including assistants and head teacher, to share coffee time and lunch time together whenever possible.

For the researcher, dangers of bias lie in membership of any given group, since '...it is difficult to recognise the ways in which your view of the organisation is coloured and constrained by the network you inhabit' (Ball 1993, p.39). Whilst acknowledging this danger, I was aware that I was working *within* my recognised networks: literacy, gender and the teaching of young children.

In matters of detail, the observer may suspect that children or adults at the other side of the classroom are doing things that may be important for her project, whilst she works with everyday tasks somewhere else. Ball urges her to:

'...stand back from the field, to review data, and to make selective decisions about future strategies in the field. Such decision-making is not in itself technical or mechanical: it is, rather, specifically tied to the amount, nature and quality of data collected and to the possibilities of data collection in particular settings' (p.39).

It is here that attention to planning was particularly relevant, though I tried to be prepared for the unexpected. The Research Journal was useful in this respect, since it recorded my own thoughts, feelings and questions.

Limited ways of recording may give rise to bias

Field notes may provide a one-dimensional picture. For example, it is difficult to record body language at the same time as talk. Open University (1991)

suggests observation notes written in columns, one noting what is done, the other recording comments and questions. Meanwhile it may be possible for a tape recorder to keep track of what is said. This frees the researcher to note other details, which later may be matched to the transcript (Swann 1994).

I found these suggestions helpful in terms of laying out an A4 page of observations (see example, Appendix 8). I found that to keep an audio tape running at the same time was too difficult. This was partly because of the ever-changing nature of the early years classroom, partly because poor recording conditions often prevailed and partly because the teachers with whom I worked disliked having their voices recorded whilst working with the children. I found it easier to record obvious body language as part of text of the written observations.

Possible distortion in the social pattern

It is likely that the simple presence of another adult in the teaching area will influence the behaviour of adults and children, introducing bias (Mercer 1991). Some researchers take extreme measures in order to disguise their presence. King (1978) hid in the home corner whilst making his observations. He almost certainly caused more disturbance than if he had acted normally. It seems more sensible to bear in mind Mercer's (1991) warning: 'The crucial issue is whether or not the observation causes serious distortion of phenomena and creates artefacts' (p.48). His own 1991 observations included the use of a video camera, complete with camera man and sound technician. He considered the situation to be 'superficially affected' (p.49) and the recordings would seem to bear this out.

Perhaps a known adult who occasionally stops writing and turns into a teacher may affect the situation even less, especially when the norm is for two or three adults to be working together in the classroom. When children asked me what I was doing, I always replied, 'Writing'. No child ever questioned this. 'Writing' is after all what early years classrooms are sometimes about. Often the children

would sit beside me and imitate what I was doing, or comment upon it in some way. For example one child remarked, 'You've got hundreds of full stops.' Building long-term relationships with adults and children in this way seems the most sensible method of ensuring that they are disturbed as little as possible, though the possibility of bias should always be borne in mind.

Talking with adults

Conversations with adults were of three basic kinds: semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews; informal conversations in the classroom; informal conversations in other settings, for example the staff room or the playground. All were intended both to explore and to verify observational data and to provide the basis for new data, which were then checked by observation.

Tape-recorded interviews

Semi-structured interviews with individual adults or adult pairs were recorded on audio tape with the permission of the interviewees. All recorded interviews were transcribed. This was time-consuming and not always straightforward, for example some interviewees spoke with strong regional accents. One dropped her voice dramatically at the end of each statement.

After I had made a general statement about the focus of the research, I used a loose framework, noted on a postcard. I was however ready to abandon this if I thought that the conversation was developing in more interesting ways. I was careful to encourage the idea that there were no right answers. I interviewed teachers alone and classroom assistants in pairs. I did this because classroom assistants gained support from the presence of colleagues and were notably more relaxed when this support was available. I hoped to encourage frank speaking by encouraging each interviewee to assume control of conversations, though I assured them that they would be able to remove from the transcript any remarks which they afterwards regretted (Walker 1978).

Semi-structured interviews always took place on neutral territory, for example the special needs base or a neighbouring classroom. They were timed for minimum inconvenience, for example thirty minutes at lunch time, strictly observed, spilling over into the next or subsequent visits if we still had plenty to say. I arranged the tape-recorder and microphone in advance. I made sure that I did not sit behind a table, and that my chair was lower than the person's who was being interviewed.

Flexibility, informality and surface meanings

Nias (1991) found the interviews for her pilot study changed the course of her project, because she decided that what she was hearing was more important than what she thought she had originally set out to discover: 'It did not take me long to realise that there was a mismatch between what they wanted to tell me and what I thought I wanted to know' (p.133). Decisions like these can alter the course of interviews and projects themselves. They can only be made through careful listening and transcription of each interview as quickly as possible after completion.

My own pilot project was carried out in a Year 1 class and had been designed to link with the main research project in several ways. These included practice in interviewing children and adults using audio recording and informal interview techniques, as well as observation. I observed girls and boys using non-fiction in different ways, and analysed this data. I conducted a small-scale trial of the children's questionnaire, and was forewarned of the difficulties. I also investigated the likely problems facing both the researcher and the researched. In spite of all this, the main project took a completely different direction from the pilot project. For example I found it impossible to follow up children's different use of non-fiction, simply because in the classes I worked with for the main project children did not initiate these kinds of interaction with each other. I was often surprised by the direction the conversations in the main project took, and like Nias (1991) I was always ready to modify my approach.

Informality has its own dangers. The interviewer may be tempted to relax too, and ask leading questions out of carelessness, introducing bias. It is easy to be insensitive and assume control which may be considered inappropriate. In these cases the information given will be tainted (Walker 1978). Adults may reveal much more than they had intended. This is why the person being interviewed should be allowed to take control of the interview data.

I found that in semi-structured interviews it was important to treat surface meaning with caution. The pilot project, part of which had tried to explore the role of the researcher, had an example of a teacher saying one thing and meaning something slightly different. When she was asked about her feelings on working with a researcher in her classroom, she replied that she did not feel personally threatened because we knew each other well:

Transcript

Janet If you had been a stranger I would have felt as if
 the research had something to do with my
 own...teaching ability rather than you looking at
 the children

JH So you might have felt threatened?

Janet Mmm but I didn't feel threatened...

In the next few sentences she said that she thought the classroom could have been arranged to better advantage:

Transcript

Janet ...there were times when I thought oh you know,
 if she had come in on such a day we would all
 have been doing this thing...because even though
 it was sort of planned the days you were coming

in felt as though you could always come in at a
better time though that's always the case isn't it?

She was saying one thing and meaning something slightly different. I had known and worked as a voluntary helper with her for three years, yet she had felt mildly threatened in spite of this close relationship. This experience taught me to be on guard when transcribing interviews and interpreting meanings.

Informal conversations in the classroom

The second kind of conversation I had with adults was informal and the setting was the classroom. Audio recording was not used. These conversations usually took place with the teacher and her assistants at lunch-time as we cleared up the classroom in readiness for the afternoon session. Sometimes I took a note, but more often I remarked on an interesting interchange and asked permission to write it down and perhaps use it later. This permission was freely given. These informal conversations were often used to check matters of fact. For example I often introduced talk about classroom happenings I had observed to be sure of including the adult point of view, as well as some element of triangulation.

Informal conversations in other settings

The third kind of adult conversation was also unstructured and took place in the staff room or very occasionally in the playground. Hammersley (1984) felt that this kind of conversation minimised the effects of the presence of the researcher. Here any adult who was interested took part. In practice this usually meant teachers, since teaching assistants rarely joined in. Again, no audio recording was used. I asked if I might note the interchanges and use them with permission.

These conversations were usually wide-ranging. They were sometimes concerned with the detailed implications of the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy, for example the discussion about Speaking and Listening noted in Appendix 2 .

Parents

I had originally planned to interview parents, either singly or in partnership pairs. I had planned to use a semi-structured formula and audio recording in the same way as with school adults described above. My plan was to interview the parents of every child in the class, provided they gave their consent. This would have given a greater degree of triangulation. In the event I realised that resources in terms of time and physical energy would not permit it, and I rejected the idea of interviewing a small, self-selected group because of inevitable bias. I regretted having to take this decision, but my intention from the outset was to concentrate on classroom processes. Yet it seemed to me that not interviewing the children's parents was a great loss to the project.

Talking with children

Tape-recorded interviews

In the case of young children the interviewer needs a special kind of self-awareness, if the rights of the child are not to be infringed. For example it is possible that a child may not wish to be interviewed, having better things to do. This right should be respected. In the event I had no problems with finding children willing to be interviewed. Such was their enthusiasm that I had to keep a careful check list in order that they had one and not two or three turns. They called it 'talking on the tape-recorder' and, unless I was very pressed for time, I played a snatch of the interview so that they could hear their own voices. They began to anticipate this as their 'reward'.

I interviewed children in pairs in order that individuals might have some support. This had disadvantages. Sometimes validity was threatened in transcription by my confusion about who was speaking. I tried to control this in the case of children by choosing interview partners with slightly different accents or tones of voice. At other times I was careful to use their names frequently as I spoke to them. A further threat to validity was when one of a

pair of respondents, usually male, dominated the transactions. In the worst cases I re-interviewed these pairs as individuals.

I interviewed each child in the sample class twice. For one set of interviews I used a selection of six to eight books of varying genres to act as a basis for talk about books and reading. Each child was given the opportunity to choose a book from the selection and talk about or read it. This first set of interviews acted as practice for the second set, and the two sets shared much common material. I have therefore not reported on them separately.

The location of tape-recorded interviews with children had to be given careful consideration. Child protection procedures meant that we could never be completely isolated from the rest of the class. This often meant that the microphone picked up a high level of background noise. I used a borrowed nursery chair or we all sat on the floor.

As the basis for the second set of interviews I adapted the 'smiley faces' questionnaire (Inner London Education Authority 1988) reprinted in The Open University (1991), to be found in Appendix 4. This questionnaire was designed to probe attitudes to literacy. I worked with children in pairs. I began by identifying the topic and reading the questions aloud. I used the administration of the questionnaire as a basis for semi-structured interviews. The children's interests were caught by ticking their choice of smiley or grumpy face, though their choice did not often correspond to the spoken answers they gave. My intention was not to use the questionnaire to gather quantitative data, but I found it useful, when considering and evaluating the children's responses, to put these into groupings according to the import of the response. The numbers are not statistically significant, not least because the children's replies were occasionally inconsistent. Sometimes they said one thing and then changed their minds, hardly surprising with such young children. Hammersley (1992) points out that 'we should not express our findings in terms that imply a greater

degree of precision than their likely accuracy warrants' (p.162). The numbers are therefore offered as a rough guide only.

As a non-threatening question, I asked about watching television. This yielded a body of data about the use of electronic literacy in the home. I was now faced with a dilemma. The planning, reading and other data gathering had as its intended focus print literacy in the classroom. Whilst being acutely conscious of the importance of electronic literacy, I reluctantly decided not to report on this data as part of the present project. I did this because I could envisage difficulties with its incorporation into my intended plan. I compromised by preserving the raw data which may be written up at a future date.

Informal conversations with children

Informal conversations with children were usually recorded as part of observational field notes. They were usually short and concerned with matters of the moment. Children usually initiated them. They often took place in the playground, cloakroom or when moving from the classroom to other parts of the school, for example into the hall for Assembly.

Audio recording of classroom interactions

Part of the original research design was to record classroom interactions on audio tape. Here I found an insurmountable difficulty. I worked with two teachers. Neither of them felt confident enough to agree to have her voice recorded in a working session. Both told me that they felt such recording to be intrusive and even threatening. This was understandable in view of the fact that one of them was relatively inexperienced and working on a temporary contract, and the other sometimes had difficulty controlling the volume of her voice. I decided to abandon the idea. It was not worth upsetting colleagues for doubtful results. For example if a simple recorder is used, it may distort events: those nearest to the microphone will be heard, those at a distance will not. Small groups can be recorded more successfully. Transcription takes up a disproportionate amount of time (Swann 1994). Analysis takes even longer. In

my judgement it was better to do without audio recordings and rely on field notes if colleagues' trust was to be maintained.

Analysis of children's work using Primary Language Record (Barrs et al. 1988)

I chose the Primary Language Record (1988) as the basis for analysing children's work because it offers assessment expressed in words, not numbers. The Cox Report (1989) commended the approach exemplified in the Record as a basis for a 'national framework for record keeping' (9:20 p.44). The non-statutory advice for English in the National Curriculum Key Stage 1 (HMSO 1989) endorsed the principles on which the Primary Language Record was based.

Initially I had planned to administer the Primary Language Record once a term for each child in the class. Time pressures meant that I was obliged to be less ambitious. Instead I sometimes made audio tapes of children using books for purposes of assessment, for example Darren and the insects (Appendix 3). In addition I used the Observation and Samples part of the Record and the guidance from the Primary Language Record Handbook on an ad hoc basis, for example when the children 'played' writing or took part in an adult-led reading group. A completed PLR observation schedule may be found in the Appendices (Appendix 7).

Research Journal

Burgess (1984) and Hutchinson (1988) recommend the use of a journal as a way of keeping personal interpretation separate from factual information. In this way personal bias may be separated and considered for what it is. Here a personal narrative may be re-checked. I also found it useful for planning ahead.

Relationships, the researcher role and its ethical dilemmas

Ethnographic observation seeks to build a picture of classroom culture as it is. The accuracy of the picture depends on relaxed relationships between the observer and those who are being observed. My role was ambiguous. I was well

known to some of those in the school as a former colleague, part of a social and early years network. Established teachers were also familiar with my research role (Hodgeon 1993). In direct terms I felt I presented no threat; for example I had no power or influence in the careers of teachers.

This may not have been the view taken by the teachers I observed. My 1993 project concerned itself with parents, gender and literacy and took place in a relaxed atmosphere, with some work in school. Now I sensed a change in research relationships within the school. Teachers had agreed to take part without outside pressure, yet there was much more tension surrounding classroom observation. This was in spite of the fact that the participants knew each other very well. The time surrounding the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy was particularly sensitive, and it happened to coincide with the beginning of the fieldwork for this project. In this context it was hardly surprising that teachers felt some degree of threat. This was particularly obvious when they were being observed working with the children in whole class sessions. Then they seemed to behave as if this was some kind of competition. When it was my turn to be on display, I realised that I too was being competitive. In the episode reported below I realised that my efforts to be the perfect teacher were not helping relationships, and I tried to modify my behaviour from this point on.

Research Journal

Y1 Research relationships

Today observed G. working with Literacy Hour phonics. Children restless, bored, badly behaved. She increasingly tense, no smiling, folded arms, sits on edge of seat. At end of this episode says 'That was awful'. I offer support in terms of I find it hard etc. After lunch G. asks me to read a story. SEN staff and G. around and paying attention, but pretending to do something else. I make sure I produce familiar story children enjoy. Don't allow interruptions on first reading, noisy

children at front. What am I doing? I'm on display and I want to make a good impression. Half way through I decide this is not a competition. Story time less impeccable from then on. G. much more relaxed next time I observe whole class session. I hope this isn't a coincidence.

I know the setting very well, though there have been significant changes since I retired. I had ideas about how the institution worked, which by now are misplaced. The appointment of a new head teacher, new government initiatives and staff changes have added to the mismatch. Mainstream numbers have fallen and the teaching spaces are used in different ways. The institution is now transformed from the one I knew.

New difficulties are matched by old. After a lifetime in early years classrooms, some things were so familiar that I could fail to see their significance. Mills (1988) points out the difference between himself, for whom the classroom is 'over-familiar' (p.28), and his students, taking up the role of teacher for the first time, for whom everything is fresh, new and remarkable. On occasions it was possible for me to shift my perceptions. I began, for example, to think about school Assembly in new ways, when I caught some of the pleasure of adults and children as they greeted each other outside the bounds of their teaching areas.

Work on social relationships with adults is of basic importance (Measor and Woods 1991). On the whole my relationships with ex-colleagues were friendly and mutually helpful. There were occasional disasters. One concerned a teacher new to the school. I unintentionally upset her by asking if she was pregnant. She was furious, and it took several months before she would speak to me, and several more before I could talk with her on a professional level.

Even with mutual trust, it was difficult to avoid anxiety. Primary teaching is seen as a personal activity (Nias 1988, Walkerdine 1987), easily threatened by

outsiders. For those less confident about their status, for example teaching assistants or the increasing number of teachers working on temporary contracts, the threat may be more immediate. Ball (1993) expresses many of these dilemmas. He says of researchers:

‘They must charm the respondents into co-operation. They must learn to ...cringe in the face of *faux pas* made in front of those whose co-operation they need, and engage in the small deceptions and solve the various ethical dilemmas which crop up in most ethnographies’ (p.32).

I was a researcher who was also an insider, and felt at a disadvantage as I sensed these undercurrents. Most importantly, I felt diffident at using colleagues’ work for my own purposes. I felt I was imposing upon busy and often tense teachers, some of whom were friends. It seemed that the only way of giving something in return was to spend some time acting as teaching assistant. This had severe disadvantages. Time spent teaching was time taken away from planned observation, though in this role I sometimes had opportunity to observe children’s interactions. The children may have concluded that the roles of watcher and teacher were mysteriously confused.

Measor and Woods (1991) emphasise the importance of immersion in the researcher role. They consider that older children will not trust the researcher unless it is made clear that she is on their side. Mac an Ghaill (1991) and Lacey (1993) make the same point. Young children appear to behave differently. They appear much more likely to trust familiar female adults who appear regularly in their classroom.

The researcher’s identity in terms of age, gender and ethnicity can be crucial. Wright (1993) found that his ignoring of ‘bad’ behaviour encouraged young black children to be frank and open. In this case the ethnicity of the researcher was the crucial factor:

‘My own ethnicity, as an Afro-Caribbean, produced a variety of attitudes ...The black pupils often held me in high esteem and frequently used me for support when they felt stressed and under threat. Throughout I remained empathetic to everyone and non-judgemental. This rapport generated considerable co-operation from teachers and pupils’ (p.26).

I have some advantages in that I am female, in late middle-age and a familiar person around the school. Young children could readily identify with me as some form of grandmother figure. I was greeted with pleasure on all sides when I appeared in the classroom. When I talked to children, I had no sense that they were holding back their thoughts and feelings. Sometimes they even displayed what I interpreted as concern:

Field Notes

Playground

Cold and miserable morning. Children seem to swirl about in unfathomable patterns. Time for a little sit down. I sit on the step writing. Mark (Y2) approaches.

Mark Are you fed up with walking round?

JH No, I’m just doing my writing.

Mark That’s OK then.

Analysis

‘...the researcher’s self plays a significant role in the production and interpretation of qualitative data’

(Denscombe 1998 p.208 original emphasis).

Throughout this report I have tried to indicate what Denscombe’s words might mean in relation to data collection. I now turn to my analysis, where I was

conscious that my personal and professional experiences played a crucial role in shaping the agenda.

Throughout my professional life I was primarily concerned with the teaching and learning of literacy. Initially I carried a personal conviction that, once children could read, other aspects of the curriculum would become accessible to them.

This is a basic functional model (UNESCO 1970), easily understood by parents and society at large. Such a discourse may foreground hierarchical skills such as word and sentence decoding. This cultural-historical view formed part of the first National Curriculum in English (Department of Education and Science 1989).

Through my reading and own observation and with the help of such scholars as Heath (1983) Street (1984) and Meek (1991), all of whom see literacy acquisition as creative and dynamic, set within a social context and with the text having a crucial influence for setting the agenda for self-realisation, I began to add to and modify my own views. I recognised in this model some of my own experiences of reading which had always been a central part of my life.

For seven years of my professional life I was a nursery teacher. I believe my experience with very young children gave me time to observe and consider how they approach the task of learning. It also gave me some sympathy with their difficulties, and an appreciation of the potential of nursery education for early literacy learning.

The aims of the analysis

My first aim was to find a way of organising the raw data so that meanings and categories would begin to emerge (Hutchinson 1988). The first step was to identify 'incidents' (Open University 1991, p.98). Here these were defined as

‘segments of behaviour, activity or talk’, for example the Christmas Concert incident described on p. 47 above. As I worked through the data, it quickly became apparent that some incidents had been difficult to observe and were impossible to analyse (Lacey 1993). For example, some of the data collected in the playground fell into this category and had to be discarded.

My second aim was to use the categories and sub-categories to develop theory. My theories would then be ‘grounded’ (Glaser and Strauss 1967 p.6). This would involve checking the analysis against findings in an organic process of research. My approach did not accord with a strict application of the basic premises of Glaser and Strauss in the following ways:

- I had a less pragmatic approach in that I adopted a carefully designed research strategy and selected my sample at the beginning of the project.
- Given my experience it was difficult for me to approach the project with a completely open mind. In addition I had a sharp focus in terms of research questions which themselves were rooted in the literature.

My approach was more in tune with Layder’s (1993) analysis, accepting some of Glaser and Strauss’s basic premises ‘but ...not...the methodological rigour espoused by the originators of the term (grounded theory)’ (Denscombe 1998 p.217).

My third aim was to use documentary evidence as part of the process of analysis. I did this by constantly checking categories and findings with the literature.

The continuous nature of the analysis

The analysis took place as part of a continuous process with data collection. I scanned observation data at the end of each day in school in order to begin to develop ideas on incidents, emerging categories and possible follow-up. I

transcribed interviews as quickly as possible and tried to establish links with observation data. My aim was to become familiar with the raw data and initiate a process where emerging categories could be re-checked by observation and further conversations. In spite of this clear aim I often felt submerged, as I discovered even in the short pilot project:

Research Diary

Pilot project

Am worried that whole pilot project has taken on a life of its own. Has not confined itself to the plan. How far is this a result of timing? The interviews seem to suffer particularly in this respect - they are much more diffuse than the project planning allows. Strands difficult to trace.

With more experience I began to find the data easier to manage. For example, I found that my familiarity with the raw data helped considerably as I sought to test and feed back my emerging categories into my fieldwork.

How the data were prepared for analysis

Field notes

All my field notes were recorded on A4 sheets as exemplified by Maybin (Open University 1991 p.69). The example I have chosen from my own field notes shows that I have tried to take care to separate my record of what happened from the questions/commentary running in parallel (Appendix 8). Denscombe (1998) recommends using serial numbers or a code (p. 209) to mark out completed observations for analysis so that items of particular interest might be identified. I began by doing this, but quickly developed my own system, using words rather than numbers, which I found easier to use. I used coloured highlighters on numbered pages to identify 'incidents' and, when I ran out of colours, I underlined or circled in various ways. I used large Post-it notes, the colours of which matched the highlights, attached to the relevant sheet with a note of emerging category, participants and context plus page number. I kept notes in a separate file as a back-up system.

This way of sorting and cross-referencing was much easier to do than to describe. My various sheets of notes could easily be sorted later and the examples were easy to trace. Transcript material could be added as appropriate.

Transcripts

I transcribed every tape-recorded interview. I omitted most self prompting, 'er', 'um' and so on, so that the transcripts were easier to read. Like the field notes, the transcripts were written on A4 sheets (see example, Appendix 3). They were headed with the interviewees' name or names, the subject and the date, for example: *Jane and Peter, questionnaire, 03/02/00*. Pages were numbered. I used the same colour-coding and Post-it system as I had for field notes. Notes were kept on separate sheets as before. The developing categories could then be physically sorted and integrated with similar examples in the field notes.

Research Journal

I did not use a coding system for the Research Journal though Post-it markers were useful. This was because I had made a practice of reading it as often as possible. The pages were numbered and dated, so that they could be coordinated with the field notes and interview transcripts. Notes on personal conversations were recorded here, as well as further memos to myself. I often used the Journal to set the wider context to particular events and happenings, and as a personal sounding board (see example in Appendix 9).

Children's work

I analysed children's work using the Primary Language Record Handbook (1988) as a starting-point. The question I asked myself was: 'Given this piece of work, what does this child know about writing/ reading?' A secondary question was: 'Is it possible to describe the kinds of learning taking place here?' (see Appendix 7).

Memos to self

These appeared on the raw data and sometimes in the Research Journal. I used them to comment on 'critical incidents' (Open University 1991 p.98). They also included reminders to check happenings in the field or cross-references linking examples in other bodies of data. Most importantly, they noted interconnections between emerging categories. In one sense these memos to self echoed and developed the personal dialogue taking place in the Research Journal. The memos were useful in that they provided a trail from which the progress of the research could be traced (see example, p. 105).

Development of the analysis

The categories which emerged from the complex process described above were tested and re-tested, both in the classroom and with reference to the literature. Numbers of illustrative incidents were accumulated before a category could be established. Unless I could find at least four examples, a category was either discarded or subsumed into another. For example the Pilot Project had produced interesting observational data on the differing use of factual texts by girls and boys. I expected to be able to follow up these data for the main body of the project. I was unable to do this because I found no comparable examples in later observations.

There were some indigenous categories which were not difficult to identify and needed less checking, for example children categorised by teachers as 'badly behaved' or 'difficult to motivate'. Each one had many examples.

It will be recalled that at an early stage I decided not to analyse and present a body of data concerned with electronic media in the home. I did this with regret, conscious of its importance in the development of different kinds of literacy. I have preserved the raw data and hope to present it in another way in the future, perhaps as a journal article. I had decided at an early stage to base the project on print media, and the focus of the project was always intended to be the classroom.

Concluding note

This chapter has described my research strategies and the data collection methods I used. I have also given an account of how I analysed the data. My next chapter will go on to describe findings related to the development of masculinities in the early years of schooling.

Chapter 4 The development of masculinities in the early years of schooling

This chapter uses my first research question as a basis for reporting on the growth of masculinities in the early years classroom:

- *How does the development of masculinities in young boys affect their literacy learning in the context of the early years classroom?*

Main findings

School organisation, teacher expectation and achievement

One of the important contexts of the early years classroom is the way that children are organised into classes or groups. I found that organisation was more than an overt factor in many teacher discussions, in that it also had hidden meanings, not always apparent to teachers and parents.

The children of the project class entered full-time schooling in September 1998. The majority had already spent three terms in the school's nursery as part-time pupils. There were thirty mainstream children, of whom eighteen were boys, and two children with special needs supported by two assistants. Their school entry coincided with the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (Department for Education and Employment 1998). This was a particular time of tension for teachers. Both the teachers with whom I worked worried aloud constantly about whether their planning was 'right' or their pacing of their whole class sessions 'too fast' for the children (Research Journal).

From the very beginning these children had a reputation as a 'difficult' class. Sometimes they were called rude names such as 'that mad lot' (staffroom conversation 24/11/99) or were discussed in terms of 'Have you ever seen anything like them?' (17/9/99). In January 1999 the parallel Reception (Year R) class was admitted. They were seen as docile and hardworking. This parallel

class had a majority of girls. The differences between the two classes were perceived as vivid. 'Chalk and cheese' was now a label in circulation (staffroom conversation 23/2/99).

In the autumn of 1999 the two classes became Year 1. Apart from Reception, the whole of Key Stage 1 was then divided into three classes by 'ability' and by age. The previous year's experiment, when Literacy Strategy groupings had been decided solely by ability with no reference to their usual class membership or age, was abandoned. This decision was based in part on the conviction that classes with one year group would be easier for adults to manage when planning for and teaching the National Literacy Strategy. It was also considered however that the new Strategy would be easier to teach to children with similar levels of teacher assessed ability. There were constraints in terms of staffing, but not in terms of space. Every teacher in Key Stage 1 at Bankside was convinced of the need for classes to be chosen by age as well by ability, for example Gina who taught Year 1:

Field notes

Y1 Organising classes

Gina ...having one year group makes it much easier to deal with the literacy and numeracy because of the planning...and it helps that they're all at the same stage...

In practice, the 'one year age group only policy' was compromised. Two-thirds of the children *were* taught in classes which were chosen from a single year group and with attention to perceived ability. Because there were three teachers available and not four, one third of the children were taught in a class with two year groups, but with possible parity of ability. Teachers reconciled this problem by pointing out that such a compromise was essential, given limited staffing resources. In addition, all the classes I observed in the project were

grouped strictly by ability *within the class*. It will be recalled that the resulting organisation for Year1/Year 2 in 1999/2000 was as follows:

Class G : Year 1 'less able' children, total 32.

Class M : Year 1 'more able' children plus Year 2 'less able' children, total 30.

Class P : Year 2 'more able' children, total 31.

At the beginning of the new school year, the Year 1 'less able' project class had twenty boys and twelve girls. It included one child with visual impairment supported by an assistant. Effectively, at the age of five and a half to six, this male-dominated class became the 'B' stream.

Discussion

Research in the 1960s and 1970s sought to make connections between teacher expectation and pupil performance. In a well-known study, Rist (1970) made a neatly argued case. He observed a class of socially mixed black children and a middle-class black teacher. If his results had been applied to the project class, the following should have happened:

'The organisation of the... classroom according to the expectation of success or failure after the eighth day of school became the basis for the differential treatment of the children for the remainder of the school year...The fundamental division of the class into those expected to learn and those expected not to permeated the teacher's orientation to the class' (p.240).

Of course this is far too tidy, and no such thing happened. Rather, the class had acquired a label which was applied to it as a whole, and it could be argued that this label was acquired *because* boys were in the majority. 'Ability' seemed to be a fixed quantity (Murphy 1974). Any child who showed signs of progress had somehow arrived in the wrong class:

Field notes

Y1 playing writing

JH Don't you think William's writing is brilliant?

Gina He should be in the other class really it's just he's
so immature

Rogers (1986) established the methodological difficulties of drawing clear connections between teacher expectation and pupil progress. One aspect of his analysis is particularly relevant here: though in some experiments the connections between teacher expectation and pupil progress were tenuous, the common finding was that the younger the children, the greater the effect.

Expectations worked in more straightforward ways with regard to gender. I interviewed teachers and classroom assistants twice over the duration of the project, and had many hours of informal conversation with them. Their stereotypical views did not change, even though they knew in general terms that I was interested in gender.

Teachers have fixed ideas about what it means to be a girl or a boy in school

Boys were seen as straightforward creatures who hardly ever sulked. Laura, the Reception class teacher, was quite sure about this.

Transcript

YR Laura and boys

Laura Well I much prefer teaching boys actually at this stage because boys are what you see is what you get... if they're in a mood they're in a mood for a moment or five or ten minutes or whatever...

By Year 1 things had not changed. Gina was sure that boys were the easy ones to deal with, partly because of her experiences outside school:

Transcript

Y1 Gina and boys

Gina ...I've always liked boys because I did Cubs I've done Cubs for a lot of years so I've liked boys and I'm sort of quite happy to deal with them...

Perhaps more dangerous than these straightforward 'I like boys' stereotypes was another conviction. Boys were more interesting to teach than girls, since they wanted to talk about everything:

Transcript

YR boys and communication with adults

Laura ...the boys are much more interesting I think as a person and a teacher I find boys of this age more interesting because er they do talk about everything they do don't they ... and they want enough reasons for doing things...and girls ...will just get on and do it...

Boys competed with each other, but not as learners; rather they wanted to have the last word:

Transcript

YR having the last word

Laura ...they want to be one step better than all the other ones all of the time ...when somebody's got something they want to have had it or be getting it a lot bigger...

Some boys found attention difficult. Special needs assistants Mollie and Jane, who often observed whole class sessions informally, were in a position to notice what sometimes happened. Boys switched off:

Transcript

YR difficulties with motivating boys

Mollie But I also think if he's not interested in what he's hearing then he just sort of switches off and doesn't pay attention does he?

Jane No he puts a gormless kind of look on doesn't he?

Some, in the words of their teachers, were 'immature', and it was considered that this was the reason for their lack of progress, especially in Year 1:

Transcript

Y1 immature boys

Gina ...he doesn't know an awful lot of letters...but I think with him it's immaturity ... he's just a bit silly...I think he's a baby

Both in interviews with open questioning and in informal talk in the class room and staff room, girls figured less. When they *were* discussed, it was mostly in terms of either how boring and conventional they could be or of how unpleasant their teachers sometimes found them. For example girls tended to be underhand:

Transcript

YR untrustworthy girls

Laura Girls even at this stage can be sly and manipulative

In addition girls could be domineering:

Transcript

Y1 playing schools

Laura Yes they do they play a lot of school I suppose it
 doesn't cross boys' minds unless the girls boss
 them into it - you sit down and do this
 (last six words spoken in mocking tone)

Girls were the ones who liked to know what was going on in other parts of the classroom and they wasted time in this way:

Transcript

YR inquisitive girls

Laura What she's picking up she's picking up from
 school and not because she's sitting listening very
 hard but because ...she's always nosing into
 everything else that's going on

By contrast some girls were compliant, particularly when they were doing their work:

Transcript

YR compliant girls

Jane ..she's always in the right place at the right time
 and doing what is asked of her and doing it well

The other side of the coin was that disruptive girls caused some puzzlement:

Transcript

Y1 disruptive girls

Gina I've got a few really disruptive girls in there and
 they're just disruptive in a different way and I
 don't know how to treat them sometimes

Adults' comments were based on the idea that boys and girls are identifiable as groups who have predictable characteristics as pupils. One teacher insisted that 'I just see children', but was talking in stereotypical terms of 'boys' and 'girls' a few moments later.

On the surface this seems very straightforward. Good-humoured, interesting boys will grow out of their immaturity and make splendid classroom companions. They might be difficult to motivate, and sometimes a little troublesome, but they will get there in the end. They are just biding their time. Faintly unpleasant, boring girls, whose ability should not be confused with neat presentation, will 'get on with it'.

Discussion

From the earliest years of work on equal opportunities in schools, stereotypes were seen as particularly harmful (Weiner 1985, Askew and Ross 1988). The harm lay in their limiting effects. Davies (1996) later noted that strong category membership has inevitable negative effects leading to stereotyping.

This particular list of stereotypes presents additional problems. Firstly they give an entirely false picture of the daily life of the classroom. Walkerdine (1987) and Connolly (1995) powerfully demonstrated that relations between boys and their teachers in the early years classroom are not always cordial, the impression given here. Secondly, if women enjoy teaching boys, why are they not achieving more? Thirdly, if women so dislike teaching girls, why are they achieving so much? A part of the answer might lie in the phenomenon of the 'interesting child'.

The Interesting Child

White (1990) points out the 'abiding ironies' of one aspect of the gender paradox:

‘...For all the public and professional promotion of ‘literacy’ as the touchstone of educational success, in the day-to-day encounters of the classroom it is the quiet girl reading and writing with untroubled competence who is thought to be merely passive and probably dull, while the boy who can barely write his own name is excused on the basis of having ‘flair’, of ‘being bored’ (p.181-2).

Epstein et al. (1998) take this argument further. They suggest that the educational difference between boys and girls is historically framed. Failure in boys is seen as extrinsic. It may be blamed on texts, methods, teachers or any other excuse to hand. Success on the other hand is seen as intrinsic, for example innate flair, natural potential. Girls have exactly the opposite frame. Their failures are inherent to their gender, intrinsic, and their successes due to lower order skills such as neat presentation. Some boys may fall into this group. Girls seldom transfer into the ‘flair’ category.

These frames were operating in the adult conversations reported here. Laura and her classroom assistants were particularly prone to discussing ‘interesting children’. Much of their informal conversation, as well as responses to interview questions, was centred on them. ‘Interesting children’ were not the same as Rist’s ‘ideal pupils’. For example Jack, a ‘good little worker’ and maybe ‘the one who will go furthest at this stage’ was compared slightly unfavourably to Darren and Michael. Neither Darren nor Michael had made a great deal of progress in literacy, as their teacher perceived it:

Transcript

YR comparing talkative and able children

Laura Where Darren and Michael will talk...about things that interest them...Jack’s never done that he’s never shown any interest in anything outside what we’re actually teaching him or what he

actually has to learn that day

The implication is clear. Jack, in Laura's eyes an able though boring child, did not bear comparison with Darren or Michael, who by implication had 'flair'. Is there just a hint that he is not a 'real boy'?

When teachers and assistants discussed girls, something different happened, for example in talking about Carlie, to me an interesting 'non-school-oriented child' (Gregory 1992). Carlie's family was in a poor socio-economic grouping. She had poor health and attendance. In spite of this, her literacy was progressing well and she had clear learning purposes. Carlie was relegated to the same level of conversational group as Jack. She got on with her work and by implication lacked 'flair'. 'Flair' was the prerogative of boys and, as such, an absorbing topic for discussion.

'Good little workers' belonged to both genders. They 'never got in a fluster or a fuff' (Jane, transcript). They preserved a low profile and 'got on with it'. By contrast, 'interesting children' in the data I collected were all male. They were eager to contribute snippets of narrative or answer questions. They sometimes understood jokes, sharing a smile across the classroom. In their teacher's eyes, they were about to bloom.

Discussion

What might the phenomenon of 'interesting children' be teaching about literacy? That 'good little workers' were not appreciated as much as those who commented on classroom happenings? That their successful literacy learning was not valued in the classroom as much as an extrovert personality and plenty of chat? Darren provided an example of a child who provided his teachers with much to discuss. He was an 'interesting child':

Research Journal

YR capturing adult attention

I arrive just in time to help with the lunchtime chores. Laura, Jane and Mollie cannot wait to begin on Darren's saga. Yesterday afternoon in the middle of some whole class activity he suddenly took centre stage. He began a long narrative with himself as the central character. In his balloon he flew off to America where he performed acts of heroism. When asked if he went to school he was scornful, but he had stayed all alone in a hotel. There was much more detail, all lovingly re-told by the adults. I remember that this is the same child who is supposedly 'not interested' in literacy or indeed in narrative, and am full of admiration for him as he feels his way into what pleases the adults. (Laura repeated this story the next day on audio tape.)

These young children were observing their school adults as they modelled gender and literacy. The 'interesting' group (male) was learning that quiet attention to the detail of literacy had no pay-off in terms of teacher attention; chat was more valued. The 'good little worker' group, predominantly female but with some males, was learning this too. There was a third group, also mixed, which was neither diligent nor chatty, of which more later.

Teachers found it difficult to interest some boys in literacy

These children might be interested in what were considered as other areas of the curriculum: for example Darren showed a passion for science:

Transcript

YR science and education

Laura ...he's got lots of general knowledge and enjoys
lots of things that aren't concerned with
...education in that...he doesn't appear to be
interested at all in any of our number work or our
literacy science he adores science...

These children had other interests, and were assiduous in following them up (Moss and Attar 1999). In Year R this applied to four boys. These were the ones who pounced on the Dorling Kindersley Eyewitness series designed for much older children whenever these books were produced in the classroom. This series has a carefully designed balance of illustration and text and makes no concessions in terms of text difficulty. The children turned the pages eagerly, talking to each other about what they saw. Curriculum choices had already been made, perhaps at home, perhaps in the nursery (Browne and Ross 1991, Hodgeon 1984). It is possible that these boys regarded such texts and the ideas that went with them as within their male area of competence (Murphy and Elwood 1998). Some displayed considerable skills when using them. Here Darren shares a book about insects (full transcript – Appendix 3):

Transcript

YR Darren and insects

JH It's got big horns that beetle hasn't it? I wonder
 what those are for?

Darren It's not a beetle

JH It's not a beetle?

Darren That beetles are black and they're wh- that's
 that's a beetle because it's black

JH I see that's a beetle because it's black

Darren Yeah

JH Do you think erm that's not a beetle because it's
 brown?

Darren Yeah because it's (.) what are them Julia?

This tape was made at the end of Darren's first term in school. At this time he had no interest in Literacy Strategy materials or story. The contrast in his questioning, level of interest and knowledge when he shared factual texts was startling, as the transcript above demonstrates. His teacher, quoted above, clearly does not classify his skills in handling factual texts as literacy. On this

evidence Darren had learned some classification skills, though at a fairly primitive level. Moss and Attar (1999) warn that boys like Darren may be disguising their non-proficiency as readers by retreating into texts where the visual images come to mean much more than the writing. Moss (1998) notes the prevailing solution: 'more non-fiction will a) meet boys' interests better and b) therefore enable them to achieve more' (unnumbered page). She points out the difficulties of this analysis, including the acceptance of boys' preferences, as well as adult inattention as to how they might have arisen.

Children's resistance strategies developed in sophistication over time

Children were active in developing resistance to what they did not understand, and this resistance began very early in their school careers. The following notes were made after a few weeks in the Reception class. The teacher is working with a whole class group:

Field notes

YR Literacy Hour

Thirty two children sit in 'bay', very small three-sided space.

Laura sits on chair facing them. Boys round edges of bay, leaning on walls. Girls together in centre of group. Children supposed to sit cross-legged, soon wriggle and roll around.

Girls have eyes on teacher. Boys prod each other, whisper, stare around, fiddle with shoes. Many requests to go to lavatory. Impossible for some of them to see flip chart.

Murmuring undercurrent.

Exactly a year later, and with a different teacher, resistance had become more sophisticated. Here Year 1 is filling in a short time between one activity and another:

Field notes

Y1 phonics

Children move from police demonstration outdoors. Take

more than ten minutes to settle. Eventually settle on carpet.

Teacher decides on time filler until break.

Teacher We'll see how many letters you know. Let's do words beginning with g

Jon Grrrrrrrr (other children join in)

Teacher (Sharply) No that's silly *words* beginning with g

Children Settle to 'g' words - go get going go-kart

Peter Crab sticks (smiles at Terry)

Teacher Let's do a g in the air, round up and down and loop we do a loop because it's easier

Terry I don't (smiles at Peter)

These boys had moved from restlessness and boredom to individual and group responses defined by the teacher as 'silly'. The social nature of their resistance should be noted. Each 'silly' answer was accompanied by smiling communication with an ally. It should be remembered that the class had been disturbed from their usual routine.

Since their earliest days in school the children in the class had been circumspect in how to use resistance. They knew when to preserve a low profile, for example when the head teacher paid a visit to the Year R class:

Field notes

YR visit by male head teacher

Children sitting on the carpet. Very restless and noisy this morning. Male head teacher arrives. Speaks quietly to Laura.

No-one speaks to children. They sit up, fold arms and maintain unbroken silence until he leaves.

The head teacher was amiable enough, certainly no ogre. The children responded in this way, it could be argued, because this was a man, moreover a man who was 'in charge of all of you' as one four-year-old once reminded me in a different context, and care had better be exercised.

Children like Terry and Peter soon gained reputations above and beyond that of the class as a whole. Children and adults believed that they and some of their friends were behind most misdemeanours in the classroom (Connolly 1995, Brophy 1985). Connolly argues that some children gain such bad reputations that they are blamed for anything that goes wrong in the classroom, even if absent from school. I did not observe this in the project, but it once happened to me as a teacher. A child later diagnosed with severe hearing loss, and for this reason restless and uncooperative, was absent. I asked who had failed to tidy the blocks. At least half the class shouted his name, and expressed surprise when told he was not in school. The episode I observed as part of the project was less serious and more general:

Field notes

Y1 automatic response

Teacher Who's making that appalling row?

Females The boys

Discussion

Boys' lack of motivation for literacy tasks was one of the problems of this early years classroom. They knew what *should* interest them. As Terry said, 'I know what real work is, literacy work' (field notes). To do real work children had to 'sit still and pay attention'. I am not sure that children understood the phrase. The spaces where they sat together were small in both the classrooms I observed, even though the teaching space available was generous. As I sat on the floor with the children, I could not avoid the conclusion that the cheap cord carpeting had something to do with their fidgeting. It became very uncomfortable after even a short time. Prestige positions near walls and cupboards and on benches drew keen competition. Boys almost always won. Clarricoates (1987b) observed this habit in older children. They could then have somewhere to lean, important when sitting upright on the floor for up to 45 minutes. From these desirable places it was difficult to see the teacher and what

she was writing or demonstrating. I suspected that this was sometimes part of their attraction.

Some boys found physical control almost impossible, and compensated by fussing that they could not see or were squashed. Girls were more likely to be accepting, though they too had some space transgressions. These included changing places and playing with their own or other people's hair. Even so, they seemed to be giving attention to the teacher, as defined by fixing their gaze and remaining still. Of course this was no indication that they were learning.

For the children this is part of what it is to be literate. To some, the non-diligent and the non-chatty, the relationship of 'sounds', 'letters' and 'words' must seem a great mystery. Even if some of this can be appreciated, physical confinement and acquiring a basic understanding of school discourse patterns (Willes 1983), as well as watching and listening to the teacher, must be exhausting. I have no examples in the data of teachers explaining to children *why* they should learn their 'sounds', for example in terms of being useful in writing. The children are therefore mystified on two levels: *what* they are doing and *why* they are doing it. The resulting inattention may grow into indifference and resistance. Alloway and Gilbert (1997) note the complex relationships between literacy, masculinity and resistance, suggesting 'a potentially abrasive interaction' (p.54) between them. Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) also consider that there might be clashes between these three. Hilton (1998) takes the argument further. She contends that there is no evidence to support the idea, basic to the National Literacy Strategy, that the teaching of more phonics or increased literacy instruction will lead to higher standards in reading and writing. She quotes Robinson (1997) who examined the data of the National Child Development Study (1958) and the British Cohort Survey (1970). It is possible then, that the whole class teaching of phonics, as prescribed by the National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching (1998), may be entirely inappropriate for very young children.

Children practised a wide range of coping strategies

From their earliest days in school boys and some girls practised coping strategies of a sophisticated kind, the following example from Year R being particularly complex:

Research Diary

YR sophisticated coping strategy

I ask D. to bring his book and read to me. He says he left it at home. He asks to work in the construction. Mollie says three children are already there. D. scowls, picks up a piece of paper, and wanders. He watches the construction area.

Twenty minutes pass. Mostly he is left alone. Clearing up time. The construction materials are put away. As soon as the children leave D. rushes over and sticks glue on his paper. As he does so he is told three times to wash his hands for lunch.

He shows Laura his 'aeroplane'. I share my observations.

Laura is sure that D. brought his book to school and finds it with the others.

Coping strategies are the strategies children bring into play as part of classroom survival (Woods 1977). Darren misled one adult. Then he wasted time until the construction, which was what *he* wanted to do, was available. Two adults were disturbed. Darren made clear his feelings about graded readers, and he did what *he* wanted to do in spite of their supposed power in the classroom. As they discussed this incident, they felt faintly that, as women, they had been cheated.

This is possibly just how Darren intended them to feel. Miller (1996) defines the space between girls and boys:

'Just as it is possible to see how the teacher and the girls conspire in their readiness to 'play the game', so it is important to see the boys as conspiring to play another game,

defined as *not* what the teacher and the girls are playing’
(p.206).

There are other subtle ways to cope with teacher demands. The following examples come from Year 1:

Field notes

Y1 drawing

Two boys and three girls have been asked to draw. The teacher says she will tell them when to stop. The girls draw houses, the boys monsters. The boys quarrel constantly about a red crayon. The girls do not join in. They just do not use red. After some time James asks ‘How long have we to draw? Shall we just draw different trousers?’

Coping strategies have many manifestations. Sometimes children will spend five minutes sharpening their pencils. Sometimes short bouts of play will be interwoven with completing or avoiding a task:

Field notes

Y1 avoiding work

Task - to write about cars or motor bikes. Whole class. Usual agonies, creating text, spelling. One group spends much of time passing eraser around, others sharpen pencils. Another group plays racing pencils by blowing them along the table.

Finding a quiet retreat worked well:

Field notes

Y1 ‘Tidy up’ time

Complex swirl of children. Some, mostly but not wholly girls, rushing around putting things away. Some children retreat to lavatories. Four boys go to book area where they sit

studiously turning pages. Teacher fetches children from lavatories and gives them tasks. Book area children not disturbed.

The class did little voluntary reading over the period of my observations. Most of it was done by boys in exactly this way.

Discussion

The picture presented here is very different from Pollard's (1987) observations of slightly older children. There the emphasis was on the acceptance of the teacher's definition of the situation. Here it would appear that the majority of the children were not interested in pleasing the teacher most of the time. Perhaps they would have been, had they known how. They *were* interested in stars and stickers, but usually happened upon them by accident, rather than by deliberate effort.

Classroom organisation was a factor. These were still very young children in a very large group. Demands were high. In whole class tasks support, even with two adults, could only be minimal. 'Streaming' meant that there was no possibility of support from more developed peers. Adults were sparing with their praise. The children got on with their own affairs, with predictable results.

Children's feminine and masculine subjectivities varied with context

Observation in the playground, cloakrooms and other lightly supervised areas went some way towards supporting Thorne's (1993) findings that the organisation and meaning of gender varied with context. I found that gender subjectivities were always on display, for example in terms of curriculum preferences and boys' tendency to dominate classroom interactions (Clarricoates 1987a). These subjectivities were slightly more marked in the playground and cloakrooms. Even within the classroom there were overt displays. There were examples in the observations where adults were made aware of the deep gender solidarity of young children, but they were markedly

fewer than those on display in the playground. Every classroom incident of this kind that I heard was checked by an adult. All of them come from Year 1:

Field notes

Y1 One of the boys

Gemma offers duster to Paul. Paul refuses to take it.

Teacher What's the matter now?

Paul I wanted mine from Tony

Teacher Don't be ridiculous

Field notes

Y1 We don't like girls

Teacher You're going to get a worksheet with a girl on

Boys Euuuuugh! (*disapproval*)

Teacher You are really being very stupid

Field notes

Y1 First 'borderwork' (Thorne 1993)

Teacher (*to girl and boy who are giggling and holding hands*) Will you two stop that? Do your courting somewhere else.

Adults could be less successful when they tried to check gender subjectivities in the playground. Here such subjectivities were on more permanent display. A common example was 'play' fighting:

Research Diary

YR/Y1 Play fighting

Playground a.m. boys play fighting game. Pull at clothing, trip, aim to put another boy on the ground (muddy, wet, cold). Adult intervenes. Boys wait until adult is distracted and continue. After lunch children gathered in hall. Team leader warns game must stop. Five minutes outdoors in the

afternoon, game begins again. Adult reproves James. 'I was just helping him up' he says of the child that he pushed down a moment before.

James is ambivalent about his role. He enjoys being in the thick of the play, but his excuse veers towards the feminine, helping and caring. It is possible that he has also divined that adult women can be placated in this way. Jordan (1995) argues that young children experiment with male and female roles, in particular seeking out the stereotypes held by adults. James provides an interesting example. He is the youngest of a family of six. All his siblings are girls. He is practising his male role, but he is more accustomed to female stereotypes.

Girls sometimes caused as much adult tension with more subdued behaviour (Clarricoates 1987a). They ate forbidden sweets and played with forbidden toys. They caused difficulties about playing in the lavatories and in the unsupervised building at playtime. They often complained about other children.

Some games were played by girls or boys only:

Research diary

Y1/Y2 Gender solidarity

Playground a.m. Girls march around playground, arms linked, chanting 'No boys on!' I ask them what game they are playing. When no boys come what will they do next? They look at me with pity. 'It's no boys on! If the boys come you have to run away.'

In fact this preamble never led to a chasing game. I have seen this game many times before and always wondered why the beginning led to no middle or end. Obviously this has no importance for the children. Boys play the same game chanting, 'No girls on!' Perhaps both games are just examples of gender solidarity with the children feeling free to express it.

As Clarricoates (1987b) noted, older boys dominated the available space. The generous outdoor provision meant that the Key Stage 2 children used another playground. The result was that the Key Stage 1 space rarely became claustrophobic. In spite of this, one gender pattern to be seen in any early years playground still operated:

Research Diary

YR/Y1 adult protection

Kath, a stranger to most of the early years children, is helping in the playground. Five or six of the Reception/Year 1 girls hold hands with her and each other. She tries to initiate chat, but this is not what they have come for. She goes off to see to some crisis. As soon as she is back the children re-appear as if from nowhere and link hands again.

Shy boys, if they are frightened or desperate for adult attention, sometimes join in. Generally though, this is a female preserve and, like other gender-exclusive games, it marks out the gender group.

Lavatories, unisex in Key Stage 1, provided places where awakening sexual curiosity could be satisfied or sexual teasing practised. All the facilities were provided with lockable doors, which had gaps underneath them. These provided endless scope for voyeurs or jokers.

Girls made complaints to adults about happenings in the lavatories two or three times a day when I was observing. I have no record in the observations of boys doing so. This is surprising because these complaints were powerful weapons. Adults were likely to follow them up with questioning and action (Davies 1987), whether justified or not. Children's sins, even in the early years, extended from sexual teasing to active vandalism. A favourite trick was to

leave taps running to cause minor floods. Adults suspected boys, but there was often no proof.

Cloakrooms provided insights into the gendered behaviour of children with parents. Parents brought children into the cloakrooms and went with them into the classroom. Teachers were busy greeting parents, so they rarely saw what happened in the cloakroom. Girls were expected to be self-sufficient in hanging up coats and changing shoes. Parents helped boys by hanging their coats up and changing their shoes for them. For example George expected his mother to perform one of these servicing tasks:

Field notes

Y1 Boys and their mothers

George comes into the cloakroom with his mother. He drops his coat behind him onto the floor. He goes off to the classroom. His mother hangs it up. Nothing is said.

Discussion

Children are sensitive to context, organisation and meaning as they construct their gender identities (Thorne 1993, Mac an Ghaill 1994). In the classroom they are cautious in revealing them. This may be because most classroom organisation in the early years is aimed at maintaining female teacher authority (Thorne 1993). Teachers did not hesitate to use this authority to check overt demonstrations of gender subjectivities in the classroom.

Once outside the classroom, children feel free to display their growing gender subjectivities. Clarricoates (1987b) noted that male aggression in older children was tolerated by the adults that she observed. I saw adults seeking to regulate it in young children when they were present at such incidents, but they were not always successful, for example in the playground and lavatories.

Cloakrooms were an extension of home. Children behaved in ways seldom seen in the classroom. Scowling, stamping young children changed into smiling pupils as they crossed the classroom threshold, in spite of their potential for resistance throughout the day.

Concluding note

This chapter has sought to address the complex ways in which children in the early years of schooling experiment with gender subjectivities. Some of the effects have been discussed. In the next chapter, and against this background, I shall turn to the interweaving of gender and literacy attainment with reference to the National Literacy Strategy (Department for Education and Employment 1998).

Chapter 5 Gender and literacy: the National Literacy Strategy

This chapter reports on my second research question:

- *What are the implications of the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy for the issues of gender and literacy learning in the early years?*

In this chapter I shall concentrate on aspects of speaking and listening, reading and writing in order to demonstrate some of the links between classroom processes and the gendered learning of school literacy. I begin with a consideration of the Literacy Strategy itself.

Main findings

The National Literacy Strategy, broadening and balancing?

The National Literacy Strategy is a strange mixture. At first sight it seems wholly based on an autonomous model of literacy (Street 1984, Hilton 1998). It ignores children's home literacies, which in English or other languages might well be substantial (Minns 1993, Wells 1987). The Strategy makes it difficult for teachers to respond to individual learning styles (Wood and Holden 2001), though attempts to do this are the purpose of such organisational strategies as ability grouping. Basic variables such as social class, race and gender are ignored (Hilton 1998). Corden (2000) summarises:

‘It could be argued that the DfEE, in producing the NLSF with prescribed programmes of study and specific learning objectives, has provided teachers with the necessary documentation for evaluating children's competence within an idealized white, middle class, middle England conception of literacy’ (p.27).

Reading is privileged over writing and speaking and listening are neglected (Corden 2000), though the first National Director disputed this (Reid 1997). Such ideas as those of Clarke and Smith (1992), advocating the teaching of critical language practice in primary schools, find no echo in the Literacy Strategy. Rather, authority is given to a different construction: more unquestioned teaching will lead to more learning. The placing of specific aspects of English in years and terms and the use of words such as 'levels' appear 'mechanistic and designed to reduce teaching to a crude instructional process' (Corden (2000, p.2).

However the Strategy also incorporates ideas such as scaffolded learning, with adults and children supporting each other (Vygotsky 1978, Holdaway 1979, Mercer 1994). It uses the concept of learning through guided participation (Rogoff 1989), for example in guided reading and writing. The idea that literacy is learned through membership of a community of more competent practitioners (Dombey 1992) forms a part of the Strategy.

David et al. (2000) quote the research of Clark (2000), noting that formality and teacher-led didactic exposition in early years classrooms have been increasing. Some of this is related to the Literacy Strategy, though government advisers stress the need for imaginative teaching, especially in Year R (David et al. 2000). As I have already noted, other influences included attacks on child-centred strategies for the teaching of reading (Turner 1990) and the 'moral panics' (Millard 1997) which ensued.

The Literacy Strategy was introduced in what was perceived by teachers to be an atmosphere of threat. Teachers were told what literacy was, how it should be taught, and how quickly. 'Top down' training had established imperatives, which were then transferred to the way in which the Strategy was implemented in schools. Inspection lurked in the background. It is important to point out here that the Strategy is not statutory, but that the Office for Standards in Education is charged with identifying where it is not implemented. In such cases OFSTED

indicates expected standards. There is no reference in the Framework to its non-statutory status. It is not therefore surprising that teachers looked upon the detail of the Strategy as something that must be done. It was only those with a great deal of confidence and experience who adapted Strategy materials with some imagination:

Field notes

Informal conversation, staff room

Team	Of course you have to take it with a pinch of salt.
Leader	I adapt it. This week it was dialogue so we wrote
KS 1	plays, made puppets, all that. The kids still learnt about dialogue

For teachers who lacked this confidence, there was a price to pay:

Field notes

Informal conversation: staff room

Y1 teacher	I've no time for a story, we don't have it. It's all noses to the grindstone. We used to laugh and enjoy ourselves. Not any more. Everybody's tired out and fed up.
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In the early years classes of the project school, the impression was of quiet, with children in class groups with their teacher or working at tables. Expensively equipped play and art areas were little used. Play sessions were rare and not related to the curriculum. The teacher shared enlarged texts with the children as part of the Literacy Hour. The stance was didactic. Unless I told or read a story myself, and it is possible that teachers were relying on me to do this, I rarely saw it outside these limits.

Discussion

The 'New Management' in education (Epstein et al. 1998, p.8) has pushed formal teacher-centred instruction back towards the beginning of schooling at the age of four. In this way, it is hoped, children will experience more of it and standards will rise. National economic prosperity will follow. Graff (1994) disputes this idea: 'higher levels of literacy have not been proved to be stimulants or springboards for modern economic developments' (p.158). Brooks et al. (1997) have shown that achievement is higher in countries where children enter school later, and are then taught using foundations laid through play in the nursery.

The implications for the learning of boys may be far-reaching. From an early age they are socialised into active, independent ways of learning which are already apparent in the patterns of activity in the nursery (Browne and Ross 1991, Hodgeon 1984). Boys may be at a disadvantage when these patterns are arbitrarily changed or where formal teaching is adopted in the nursery. The project class was admitted to full-time schooling when the youngest children were barely four and a half. They were immediately faced with a didactic regime for literacy learning which required long periods of passivity, despite the views of acknowledged experts in the field (Meek 1998, Whitehead 1999, Graham 1999).

It is ironic that, in the early years experiences of this class, one of the effects of a *literacy* strategy should be the confinement of story to big book didacticism. One example came from Year 1:

Field notes

Y1 Each Peach Pear Plum whole class group

Teacher We're going to read this as a rhyme, then tell it as
a story

Class (read together) *Each Peach Pear Plum I see Tom*
Thumb

Teacher Terry you didn't stay in at playtime you'll have to do it at lunchtime

Class (read together) *Tom Thumb in the cupboard I spy Mother Hubbard*

Teacher (points to *Hubbard*) What sound is in the middle?

Class (confused babbling, shouting)

Teacher Don't shout there's a bb in the middle can you tell me some nonsense words to rhyme with *Hubbard*?

Session continues for a further 32 minutes.

Many enlarged texts that I saw in use did not match the quality of *Each Peach Pear Plum*. Simple repetitive language patterns predominated, sometimes forced and awkward. These patterns were sometimes used as the basis for children's writing. Sometimes I asked myself *why* texts were approached in particular ways, as with *Each Peach Pear Plum* above. A *variety* of texts and contexts is needed, including the use of complex materials that children cannot read for themselves (Bruner 1986, Heath 1988, Meek 1988, Appleyard 1990). Some will have this experience at home, though adult reading of story is likely to stop as soon as the children are able to read for themselves at a basic level (Hodgeon 1993). Working with parents for the 1993 project, I found them to be much more interested in what Moss later (1999) called the proficiency aspects of reading, that is reading aloud for assessment. As one mother said, 'I think it's much nicer when they read to you, don't you Julia?' In the absence of story reading for enjoyment at home and at school, a large gap is being left in the literacy education of young children. The resulting readers may well be *able* to read, but may show no interest in *wanting* to do so (Graham 1999).

Speaking and listening, gender and the National Literacy Strategy

As Corden (2000) states, work by linguists and educationalists in the 1960s and 1970s (Halliday et al 1964, Halliday 1978, Rosen and Rosen 1973, Tough 1977) revealed the importance of classroom talk and pupil-teacher discourse.

This work was developed by Edwards and Mercer (1987) and Willes (1983) who examined children's use of school discourse routines and their relationship to learning.

The dissemination of ideas about the importance of classroom talk was particularly efficient, for example Tough's (1977) INSET courses for teachers of young children with their videotapes and discussion groups. Teachers themselves were given the confidence to undertake classroom research as part of three projects approved and financially supported by central government: the National Writing Project, the National Oracy Project and the Language in the National Curriculum Project (1987 -1993). Taking part in these projects was for many primary teachers a first introduction to the theoretical work on which they were based. For example, the Language in the National Curriculum group of which I was a member read and appreciated the work of Wells (1987). Cohen (2000) comments: 'A recurring message was that talk has a central role to play in developing children's knowledge and understanding' (Introduction, unnumbered page). The authors of English in the National Curriculum (1989) devoted a third of its length to what was now termed 'Speaking and Listening'.

By contrast the National Literacy Strategy Framework has few remarks to make about oral language:

'Literacy unites the important skills of reading and writing. It also involves speaking and listening which, although they are not separately identified in the Framework, are an essential part of it' (p.3).

The National Literacy Strategy Framework goes on to commend 'good oral work' (p.3), which should be 'discursive' (p.8) but gives no examples or space in planning documents. As the following episode shows, thoughtful oral work can be next to impossible with large groups of very young children, even with the best of intentions:

Research Journal

YR Reading and talking about a story

Straight after lunch I read story to whole class and attempt talk about book. A mistake. Children yawning and tired. Aimless responses led by boys, who are in a large majority anyway. One yells 'I can climb big trees'. Others shout 'I can, I can' many times. If a girl made a remark I missed it. Suddenly I have had enough of this waste of time. I say (quietly in the circumstances) 'No!' and insist they listen to the story again.

Memo to self

In refusing to accept their contribution, however basic, am I merely teaching my female and counter-culture right to control? Does my insistence on school discourse routines imply that their part in the conversation is worthless? The answers have to be yes. What are they learning? Don't ask questions (they didn't), don't speak out of turn, don't offer social chat. The boys do the majority of shouting and occupying my attention. Leaving aside more complex theories, is this just because they have been socialised into shouting louder?

By November the Reception children still had no idea of school discourse routines, in spite of many reminders every time the class worked as a whole group. It is clear that they did not have a basic conceptual understanding of questions and answers. This is in spite of a great deal of experience in questioning and answering both at home and at school. It could be argued that it is the *form* of school adult/child interactions that puzzle them (Heath 1988). It is perhaps more likely, in the context of the early years of an English primary school, that it is the lack of access to the metalanguage underlying questioning

processes which shuts the children out from adult expectations of ‘discussion’.
The following example would tend to support this argument:

Field notes

YR Phonics revision, whole class

One child takes a small object from a box. Another child has to choose its initial letter from those written on the white board. Teacher asks ‘Who knows what this begins with?’
Quickly the children become noisy and confused.

Teacher No shouting out or we’ll get mad. Sasha?

Sasha (is silent)

Teacher (to Mark who has ‘shouted out’) Is your name Sasha?

Mark (aggrieved) I put my hand up

Teacher What is it then?

Mark (is silent)

Teacher What’s the point of you shouting out then?

Nor is this basic knowledge explained in any detail. In the following example, children might have asked themselves important questions:

Field notes

YR Sharing a big book

Teacher (Sighing) It’s always the same ones. (Patient voice) If you think you know, put your hand up.
You have to learn to listen, then put your hand up

Memo to self

Some questions children might have asked :

What is it I am expected to know? Why do I have to put my hand up? What is it that I have to listen to? Why do I have to put my hand up again?

On this evidence boys were much more likely to transgress school discourse patterns than were girls, not because they understood them less clearly, but because they were more confident in speaking out in front of the class and its adults. They enjoyed taking the stage, whatever the size of the group, and were prepared to take risks with 'wrong' answers or 'inappropriate' behaviours:

Research journal

YR talking about books

Small group, two boys, Mona and me. First attempts to make tape of children discussing factual texts. Disastrous. Boys shout, demand to play with mike, talk continuously, snatch books. Ignore both of us. Mona sits still, hands folded, eyes patient. Not surprisingly, when asked to speak she does so in whispering tone. I make a note to manage the group size and gender make-up more carefully next time.

The boys were monopolising and setting the agenda for the discourse in an even more defining way than they had in the class group. Unless I asserted myself as a teacher, it was doubtful if any sensible conversation would take place. Instead I decided to follow up my note and choose group members more carefully.

By the middle of their Reception year, bearing in mind that boys were in a majority, their idea that their domination of talk was legitimate was being endorsed by their teacher:

Field notes

YR shared writing, whole group

Children very restless and noisy, windy outdoors. In ten minute timed period Laura asked 16 boys questions by name

as opposed to 8 girls. Questions differed by gender. Boys' questions open, seeking to further the plot of the writing e.g. what do you think happened next? What did the bad guys do? How did they take the horses away? Also two or three spellings. Girls' questions *all* referred to spellings, How do you write 'the'? Special needs children took no part.

Memo to self

Possible pattern? *Numbers* of questions may reflect the gender imbalance of class. *But* she also addresses questions as a form of management. Example: John playing with neighbouring child's shoelaces is asked a question as soon as she notices what he is doing. Is she is anxious to avoid any kind of hiatus when bored children can get into mischief? Can so many questions in such a short time give *any* space for thought? Is the subtext here the importance of teaching *boys* to think?

Consistent patterns in questioning did emerge in whole class sessions. When using some kinds of materials, for example in the teaching of phonics, the use of open questions was difficult and the quality of questioning as between girls and boys was similar, though boys were still asked many more questions than girls. This held true with a different teacher and these same children almost six months later:

Field notes

Y1 phonics, whole class group

Teacher Let's look at this one, what's the name of this letter?

Class (shout in confused fashion)

Teacher Craig? Michael? Janey? Tony?

Tony 'R'

Teacher OK, good boy Tony. Hands up if you can give me

a word beginning with T. Terry? Peter? Michael?
Carlie?...

Some teachers were impatient with the constraints on the conduct of speaking and listening they considered the National Literacy Strategy had imposed:

Field notes

Tina (Y3 teacher) talks about oracy.

Informal conversation, staffroom

Tina Whatever happened to the Oracy Project? With a whole class group you can never be sure who's listening, or if they've taken anything in. The kids don't talk except to answer questions in the old routine. There's no development of their talk in a whole class group.

Some teachers missed what they considered to be an even more basic freedom, the simple social chat which they had enjoyed with children and for which they now felt there was 'no time'.

Field notes

Assembly time

As the children come into the Hall for Assembly, a Y1 child approaches her teacher. She smiles and the teacher smiles in response.

Child I've got new shoes

Teacher I know love, and I would have liked to talk about that but teachers have no time to talk about shoes any more. Let's just have a little look

Discussion

In this section I have tried to establish how some aspects of the teaching of speaking and listening have changed with the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy. The domination of boys in different speaking and listening contexts reported by French and French (1988 p. 67) and in Swann and Graddol's (1993 p. 155) re-analysis of the data of Edwards and Mercer (1987) has not changed. Boys continue to take risks and to act on imperfectly understood discourse routines. Teachers continue to ask more questions of them. These questions are of a more open nature than those addressed to girls, and they demand more thought, if there is time for thought, in their answers (Hodgeon 1984). The result is to reinforce boys' domineering behaviours in any kind of classroom conversation, perhaps diminishing their listening skills (Edwards and Mercer 1987, Clarricoates 1987a, French and French 1988).

Much speaking and listening work in the context of whole class groups has re-emphasised these patterns. Some adult strategies, such as the use of questioning as management, have become more prominent. It could be argued that this is the result of having to manage very young children in these large groups.

There is no doubt that experienced teachers were dissatisfied with their own work in speaking and listening. Sometimes they blamed the unwieldy nature of the class group for what they saw as lack of progress. Sometimes they felt that they were just short of time. For the less experienced the situation was more problematic. They had no remembered standards to work by. In this context it was interesting to note that oracy work in the National Numeracy Strategy appeared to be of a much higher standard, both in terms of large group management, questioning and response. This could be because the National Numeracy Strategy Framework emphasises that children should describe processes and operations. As a result teachers' questions are widened in scope.

Reading, gender and the National Literacy Strategy

Schooled literacy, an introduction

One hour each day was devoted to the National Literacy Strategy. This had advantages and disadvantages. In the words of the National Literacy Strategy Framework:

‘Why an hour? In the guidance on time allocations underlying the National Curriculum English is allocated about 5 hours per week ...’ (p.8).

When a strict time allocation was made part of the National Literacy Strategy, it could be argued that two things happened. Certainly five hours per week were set aside for literacy, but it might be implied that *only* those five hours were to be used. In the class that I observed over five terms, this was the case. Children ‘did’ their literacy every day at a certain time of day, a phrase which betrayed what counted as literacy (Meek 1988). Outside these limits they might have finished odd bits of tasks left over from the Hour, but literacy was by and large confined to it. For example there was no provision for individual private reading. Children did not use the class library for pleasure or relaxation.

Teachers and assistants constantly reminded children that they had come to school to work, to learn to read, to pay attention, to listen, not to play. Laura’s sentiments, if not her words, were echoed many times in the field notes:

Field notes

YR, whole class group

Children sit confined in small space, focus on teacher

Laura (holds up printed letter C) We just sang all the alphabet, can you tell me what comes after C?

Class (some wriggling and private chatter)

Laura You’re here to work not to have a nice time playing games!

In this way literacy was presented as 'real work'. School literacy became a series of skills to be acquired, and was taken up as such (Hall 1987), in spite of the National Literacy Strategy Framework warning that the Strategy 'is not a recipe for returning to some crude or simple form of 'transmission' teaching' (p.8).

The Literacy Hour regularly began with a whole group session when the teacher took centre stage. This session could be devoted to the teaching of phonics, when the teacher faced many difficulties. If the children were expected to answer questions, but otherwise remain passive, they quickly became bored. On the other hand, if they were expected to take a more active part, their confinement meant that they infringed each other's personal space. By the end of their first term in Year R, most children could identify initial 'sounds' in reply to the question, 'What do you think this word begins with?' Few children could write every letter on demand. Other children in the class asked 'What does it look like?' for all letters except perhaps those in their name. They were failing to connect the 'sound' with the written symbol. Progress was slow.

I heard no overt explanations concerning the purpose of learning 'sounds' and letters. The children were also puzzled about the order of letters in words. They could cope with 'beginning' but were mystified about 'middle' and 'end', even as far as Year 1. For example, when John spontaneously tried to use letter 'sounds' in Year 1, he added to the puzzle by using them in the wrong order:

Field notes

Shared reading: five children and I look at a book about dinosaurs

I work with five children with *All Aboard Dinosaur*. As usual they find most attractive page (to them) and want to start with that. Why not? Adults skim factual texts too. This is facts for children, the words are carefully graded. Text example:

Some dinosaurs are BIG - picture of huge dinosaur

Some dinosaurs are small - picture of tiny dinosaur

Read book together and individually, point out layout etc.

Memo to self

Am not sure that I conduct this activity with any competence,
but some light dawns when John, using phonic cues, tries to
read 'small' as 'llams'. Write this in his assessment.

The children also had to remember their 'High Frequency Words'. Each child who was considered to have made some progress was given a selection to keep in an envelope. The words were taken home to practise out of context:

Field notes

Y1 Carlie's high frequency words

Carlie takes six or seven words written on small cards out of an envelope marked 'Carlie'. She arranges them in a column and reads them all out of context. I am impressed. I jumble them up. Now she can read three of them. She had memorised them in a particular order, without which she is lost.

Bearing these contexts related to schooled literacy in mind, I asked twenty nine of the class, eighteen boys and eleven girls, two questions about reading. This set of interviews took place near the end of the second term of Year I. I was interested in finding out about their attitudes to reading and writing in school. In order to make the interviews interesting for the children, I used a questionnaire adapted from The Hackney Literacy Study (Inner London Education Authority Research and Statistics Branch (1988) in The Open University E621 MH p. 56), as given in Appendix 4. This allowed the children to grade the degree of liking without having to write. I paid much more attention to what the children *said* rather than what they *did*. The use of the questionnaire format was also intended to disarm their suspicions and encourage frank talk. All their responses were recorded on audio tape and the tapes were transcribed. Two children filled in their questionnaires at the same

time. I found it easier to work with pairs of the same gender. This avoided problems with male-dominated conversations, though I did occasionally work with boys and girls together in order to have different voice tones. I was interested in the responses to two main questions about reading:

- How much do you like reading to yourself?
- How much do you like reading to grown-ups?

It will be recalled that the year group had been organised by ability and age. This class was the unspoken 'B' stream, with a large number of boys, who might be said to fit teachers' stereotypes. These included ideas that they were 'immature', 'interesting' or 'disruptive'. Those who had made some progress in literacy were already in the unspoken 'A' stream, a class chosen by ability, but mixed in age.

Children reading to themselves

In my description of the administration of the 'smiley faces' questionnaire (Inner London Education Authority 1988), which I used as a framework for informal interviews with children, I indicated that any numbers quoted with regard to children's responses are not statistically significant. Such numbers are included in what follows as no more than a rough guide to the children's attitudes.

Twenty two of the twenty nine children (eighteen boys and eleven girls) that I interviewed said that they read to themselves. Thirteen were boys, nine were girls. I included in this figure *any* child who said that they read *anything*. Five boys and two girls said that they read nothing. There was no evidence of voluntary reading in the classroom, unless the children were using it as an avoidance strategy. This happened when small numbers of children used the class library area as a retreat in order to avoid such tasks as tidying up the classroom at the end of sessions. There was no provision of time for 'quiet reading' in the school day.

The children were well aware that they were dependent readers (Barrs et al. 1989), so they needed materials they could manage for themselves. Super heroes, football and wildlife comics and magazines were popular with boys. They said they could not read the words, they liked them because of the pictures. One girl enjoyed 'stories about Jesus'. Other girls enjoyed stories about pets and Barbie, in one case a book with a set of free false fingernails.

Two of the boys had more selective tastes. They were devoted to comics which provided information loosely classified as 'science':

Transcript

Darren I like comics what are good ones about earth ...
 and space

Michael enjoyed comics about transport, especially trains. These two children were the kind of non-fiction readers described by Millard (1997), as compared with boys who enjoyed more mixed texts. These particular boys had come into Year R hooked on beetles, dinosaurs, space and transport. A few weeks after starting the Reception class, Darren displayed his interest and skill in using a book about insects (Appendix 3). Their favourite texts in school, the Dorling Kindersley Eyewitness series, were designed for much older children. The most marked characteristic of their favourite books was a concentration on illustration, as opposed to text.

Moss and Attar (1999), working with older children who were beginning to read independently, noted that male preoccupation with non-fiction texts is a retreat from the 'reading for proficiency' (p.136) of basal schemes. One child directly supported this theory. Lee explained in some detail how he read about dinosaurs because readers were too difficult:

Transcript

Y1 Lee talks about reading

Lee I read dinosaurs or something like that 'cos I
 can't... I can't read like Rosie and Sam went,
 something... I can't read like that if you have a
 big long word...I can't see what it says

The children's talk about texts reminded me of Meek's 1996 ideas on the difficulty of maintaining an absolute distinction between fiction and non-fiction. They did not use these terms, simply referring to 'comics', 'dinosaur books' and so on.

Three girls and two boys said they read because doing it would help them to become better readers. One referred to the guided reading of the Literacy Strategy:

Transcript

Y1 Reading with a teacher

Tony I like the pictures and the words and it helps you
 with your words and your books when Miss reads
 with you

Of the five boys and two girls who did no reading, one girl never read at home because her little sister interrupted her. Four boys and one other girl said that reading was just 'too hard' or 'I'm not a good reader'. One child was particularly determined:

Transcript

Y1 Determined not to read

Mona I don't I don't read to myself at all, not comics,
 nothing

Two of the non-reading boys had found a solution. Not being able to read to themselves, they asked other people to read to them. In one case 'Mum just reads it'; in the other a brother did the same.

Discussion

It is depressing to hear the flat certainty of the 'can't do it' group, the majority boys, though interestingly no child with special needs. If confidence, motivation and enjoyment are part of literacy learning, these children have a long way to go before they see themselves as literate persons (Barrs 1998). Their introduction to formal literacy tasks at the age of four assumed on the part of the teacher some expectations of early independent reading, for example learning 'high frequency words' (Department for Education and Employment 1998 p.60) and the use of reading schemes. They have found this difficult and have given up.

The twenty two children who did read to themselves assumed that the question implied 'at home', and not 'at school'. It could be argued that, in doing so, they were making a judgement about school literacy. Literacy might be 'learned' at school, but it might not be highly valued in post-school society (Alloway and Gilbert (1997). These children were not certain that it was valued *within* school, since the texts they enjoyed were not provided there, for example comics. Factual texts approved by the school were equally not available in the classroom, being kept in a central school library. Whenever the children needed to use them, for example for a science topic, the books had to be brought into the classroom from this central space.

Texts available at home did include books, as many were careful to point out. Like the books in school, these have to be 'read'. Several of the children, as well as the 'can't do it' group, explained that this was difficult *and for this reason* they preferred picture texts of various kinds, but mostly comics. The split between home and school had been established in Year R and was growing

ever wider (Heath 1983). In effect the children were in the process of creating literacies of their own (Hilton 1996).

Many of the products of popular culture are specifically gender biased (Hilton 1996). There is a world of difference between Batman and Barbie with False Fingernails. Children, whose self- image is already deeply gendered, respond happily to them (Davies and Banks 1992). For example one morning John brought a large hardback into school which caused great excitement. It was what could only be described as a horror comic complete with lurid illustrations (World International, no author or date given). After much pleading on his part and reluctance on mine, I looked at it with him and all the boys in the class at playtime and in the playground, thus teaching John that his literacy was not approved in school. No girl came near. This was obviously a 'boys' thing'.

Models for literacy were hard to find in comics and books. This is in contrast to other European cultures. For example in one French text a young wolf, surrounded by Christmas toys, quietly reads his book (Guy 1997). Pidgeon (1998) remarks, 'If only Luke Skywalker were ever seen sitting quietly, reading and writing!' (p. 34). Davies (1987) disputes the idea that such images might make a difference. She found that young children made their own interpretations of non-sexist texts, and in a follow-up study (Davies and Banks 1992) found that older children were still doing so.

Children reading to grown-ups

Of the twenty-nine children in the class that I interviewed, fourteen boys and nine girls said that they read to grown-ups, though twelve of these children, seven boys and five girls, said that they did not like doing it. They complained that it was 'boring', 'too much hard', 'too difficult the words'.

Seven children, five boys and two girls, insisted that they read to grown ups not at all or only under duress:

Transcript

Y1 Reading to adults

Mona I don't like it all...It's because I can't read and I
 don't like reading I don't want to read to grown-
 ups at school

Mona was unusual in that she mentioned reading to grown-ups at school. As with the first question, many other children had the idea that I was only interested in what went on at home and not at all in school.

Some children were willing to say *why* they didn't like reading to adults. Two boys found reading to school adults mildly frightening. One called it 'scary' and another said, 'I can't read because they're a bit big to read to and I can't read'. Children insisted that they 'need help', 'can't make my words up', 'know all the letters but don't know the words'. Two girls resented time spent reading when 'you can't play with your friends'. One girl had a cast-iron excuse: 'I try but it's hard. I fall asleep in bed then I can't talk.'

Except for the children who denied doing any reading at all to grown-ups, the others in the class took part in some kind of reading partnership, however reluctantly. All of them were part of a reading culture at home. This culture included a wide selection of adults: parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. Male adults were mentioned as often as females, for example in two cases reading together seemed to be something fathers did with children in their access time.

Two of these families contained adults who themselves suffered from low literacy levels (Purcell-Gates 1995), as I had discovered when I taught their older siblings. These adults were emotional in revealing this to me (personal conversations 1992/3). They were all the more determined that their children should succeed (Hodgeon 1993) and gave what support they could.

In addition to reading to adults, the majority of the twenty two children who said that they read to grown-ups talked also about reading to or with other children. These included siblings, cousins and friends. Here females were prominent, but by no means alone. Siblings played an important part (Clark 1976). Gregory (2001) focused her research on partner siblings who were close to each other in literacy development (p. 301). Using children's accounts of their own experiences, I found that they were choosing to use two kinds of support system, which appeared to be based on practices experienced in school. In one system, children read to younger siblings in a relationship that designated them as the experts and qualified them to assess proficiency:

Transcript

Y1 Reading to a younger sibling

Michael I learn my sister how to read I like to learn her
 stuff I keep doing Red Level books and she
 copies them and does them very well

One child with special needs even read to her four elder brothers, none of whom could read for themselves:

In the other support system, children read to available older siblings who fulfilled the same role as an approving adult listener.

Transcript

Y1 Reading to older siblings

Anna I love reading to them a lot and a lot and a lot. I
 read to my brothers they do laugh they can't read

Darren was explicit about the differences he sensed when reading to adults and reading to his younger sister:

Transcript

Y1 Reading to a younger sibling

Darren I can't read... I read to my sister she's smaller but
I only tell her words. I like doing that

Much of the reading children did to adults and siblings was based on reading schemes. Practice in word recognition was important to them (Geekie et al. 1999). They valued support:

Transcript

Y1 Sorting out 'hard words'

Terry And there's a pirate one but the pirate one's easy
so I try to read it and my Dad does the hard words

A few minutes of closeness with a loved adult were treasured:

Transcript

Y1 Quiet time

Peter Sometimes my mam sits still for me when she's
watching telly. I come down and there's lots of
books to read to her and I see her

The range of materials used when adults read to children was wider than when children read for themselves. It included 'Jesus stories', picture books, fairy stories and stories about pets and wildlife. Adults did not share children's enthusiasm for popular culture, but this gap was often filled by siblings. Male adults shared science materials with the two boys who were interested in them.

Discussion

The evidence about children's reading is striking in one respect. This is that they valued their *home* literacies above those of the school. This emphasis was slightly more important for boys. School reading might help with the mechanics, but real reading was done at home. It is important to remember that,

on the evidence of the observations, the reading the children did at school, apart from the Literacy Hour itself, was sparse.

For many years there has been a culture of blame on the part of teachers, rooted in parents' supposed lack of interest in their children's literacy. This lack of interest has often been connected with socio-economic status. One teacher in this project was no exception:

Field notes

YR informal conversation: lunch hour classroom

Teacher The trouble with these (children) it's the parents.
 No interest in what they do at school. Some of
 them don't come to parents' evenings

On the children's evidence, parents' support for, and interest in, their children's literacy was reassuring. It re-emphasised my 1993 findings. Then the family with five boys and a low income had the warmest shared reading culture, using the library regularly.

The importance of siblings and their dual role in supporting learner readers cannot be overemphasised. Children were sometimes threatened by adults in their reading for proficiency role. In relationship to younger siblings the learner could be the teacher, the expert. This was a new and valued experience.

Siblings also played an important part in young children's writing in the early years. It is to a consideration of children's attitudes to writing that I now turn.

Writing, gender and the National Literacy Strategy

Adult directed writing

Writing of some kind frequently formed part of the Literacy Hour. Tasks often took the form of worksheets. They tested reading in terms of knowledge of phonemes, 'missing words', or correcting sentences in terms of sense. Often

worksheets were commercially produced; often they were explicitly tied to the stages of the Strategy.

Edelsky (1996) questions the link between these 'typical school reading and writing assignments' (p.85) and 'regular reading and writing' (p.85). It is a question which puzzled me in the initial stages of the project. Was a particular exercise reading or writing? How were these tasks to be assessed? Did that assessment have any meaning in terms of literacy learning?

Edelsky differentiates literacy tasks in terms of 'literacy-as-reading' and 'literacy- as-NOT-reading', according to whether the reader aims to make meaning for herself (p. 86). I found this a helpful distinction. Also useful was her consideration of the difference between literate-person-as-Object and literate-person-as-Subject (p.97), referring to the degree of control the person has over print use and conduct of the literacy event. In the following example the children clearly have no control, and it seems possible that the teacher is being controlled by commercial interests (Fairclough 1989):

Field notes

Year 1. Completing a worksheet, whole class group

*Worksheet from Developing Literacy Sentence Level,
Year 1 (A. & C. Black 1999).*

Teacher reads aloud 'wrong' sentences. Points out list of words in box on right of sheet. Asks children to write 'proper' words in new sentences. Children to work in pairs. Observed group works as four. Ellie reassures Carlie that she can 'play'. Girls work together, discuss 'answers'. Boys do not talk to each other, but ask girls questions e.g.

Gary 'Good' do you have to cross out 'good'?

Ellie Yes

Gary But what then? What do you have to do?

Children continue to confer in this way. No child writes a new sentence, or substitutes a 'proper' word, though they manage to spot 'wrong' words sometimes.

In this episode the focus is perhaps on writing, since the teacher has tried to make meanings for the children in her introduction to the activity. They are at a loss and relapse into coping strategies, where they ask questions or copy the work of the person who might possibly know the answers (Pollard 1987).

When teachers initiated independent writing episodes, 'regular' writing in Edelsky's words (p.86), children and adults became tense and uncomfortable. There are few examples in the data. The children constantly asked for support. Boys' coping strategies included difficulties with sitting still and remaining on task. They crossed out what they had written or copied the work of the child next to them. Teachers became impatient, because some children were not able meet the standards set in terms of spelling, handwriting and basic punctuation. The result was to create feelings of inadequacy on all sides. Boys were brought into conflict with their teacher, laying the foundations of future resistance. The girls, more socially adept, had the sense to keep a low profile and at least pretend to get on with what they were supposed to be doing:

Field notes

YR, writing a letter to Father Christmas, whole class group

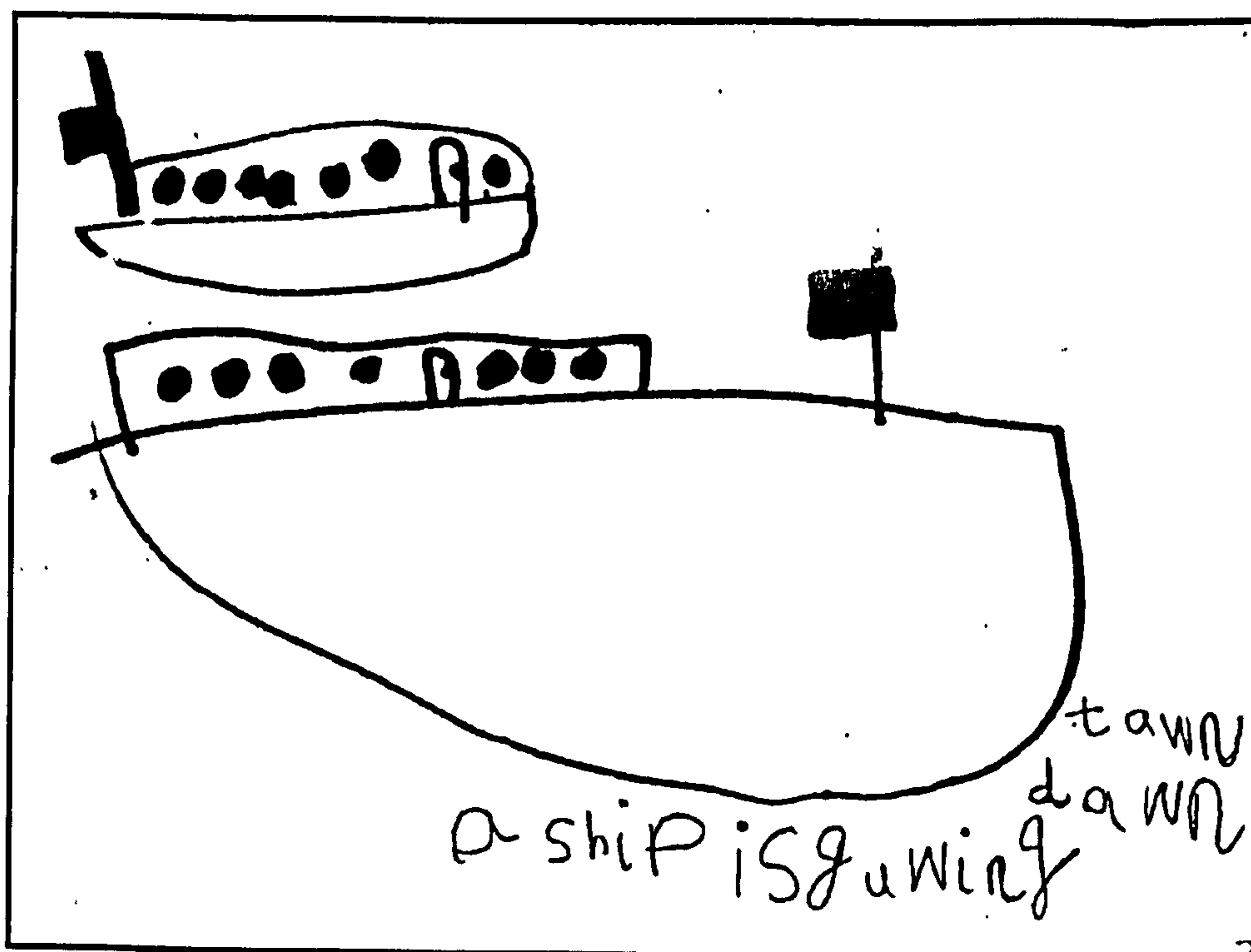
Preparation - T. has whole group in small sitting area. Invites children to tell her what they would like Father Christmas to bring. Children keen to chat about this. T. writes names of various toys on white board, also 'I' 'like' 'would'. Task - Children instructed to write own letter in book. Three adults to supervise. Some children put off task for as long as possible, chatting, sharpening pencils and so on. After ten minutes or so I become aware that children are unusually

quiet. They are listening to T. who is annoyed with James. She keeps asking to see his work which seems not to be progressing. Finally she whispers privately to me 'He's getting on my nerves'. As the writing session moves to its end she appears increasingly stressed and unhappy. 'We don't do enough writing' she says. All my references in this episode are to boys as adults manage their behaviour, urge them on, tell them to sit properly, stop sharpening pencils.

Writing as play

When the children had a rare opportunity to initiate writing themselves, tension disappeared and it became possible to discover what they had learned (Clay 1975, Czerniewska, 1992, Washtell, 1998):

Figure 5.1: William's ship



Field notes (see Figure 5.1)

Y1 William plays writing

William, 'choosing' time. Working alone, drawing. I sit beside him writing. He displays some interest. I ask him if he would like to write about the ship he has drawn. Does so quickly and without support.

William's knowledge about writing:

It runs from L - R in lines, but he is not sure what to do when space runs out.

Letters are grouped to make words.

Words have spaces between them.

He can spell some words correctly - 'is', 'a', 'ship'.

He is using local speech as a basis for spelling- 'guwing'.

He can repeat spellings when appropriate- 'dawn', 'tawn'.

He can compose a sentence, holding it in his mind until it is finished.

His sentence is relevant to other material i.e. his ship drawing.

(based on Meek 1989 pp 77-78)

There are several other examples of self-initiated unsupported writing in the data, the majority from girls, often as dedications to parents and friends of the pictures they had drawn. They show that the children could demonstrate considerable writing skills. These abilities were largely hidden from their teachers, who were misled into judging their performance through exercises and other work produced in stressful situations. Sometimes teachers did not know that the children had been writing, since the evidence was quickly folded up to take home.

Edelsky (1996) considers the purpose of exercises to be 'instructional or evaluational' (p.87). It seemed to me that the children were learning little from them. Success in completing exercises depends for the most part on knowing how to fill in the form, and it was on this basis that it was assessed. Ability to complete exercises might be important. As Harmon (1996) points out, good test takers may need to know form-filling tricks (p.164). It is just possible that girls,

who are more liable to conform to routine, may be better at learning these tricks than boys.

Writing, children's views

I asked the same twenty-nine children one question about writing and one about drawing:

- How much do you like writing stories?
- How much do you like drawing pictures?

I included the question about drawing because drawing and writing are strongly linked in the minds of young children (Clay 1975), and it was likely that one activity would lead to the other.

Five boys and three girls said that they did not write at home or at school. Jonathan said that at home he played out and at school 'I just draw pictures'. Mark was a child who 'didn't hardly do stories at my house'. Craig thought writing was 'a bit boring...I don't like it much'. Paul listed his difficulties: 'It's hard to spell. It's hard to think of a story. I can't even think of one now'. Writing made Tony tired, 'it makes your arm ache'. Three girls agreed. Janey 'only drew pictures at home and at school'. Ellie said she 'didn't like writing that much'. Emma only liked writing 'a little bit 'cos it takes a lot of time'. This group, with more boys than girls, was roughly a quarter of the children interviewed.

Fourteen children, a balance of girls and boys, talked about copying texts from the printed page. Michael said that he liked to 'sometimes copy off the pages'. This activity can be part of the culture of 'playing school' with siblings. James played with his sisters, who allow him to use their 'glitter pens' if he will co-operate. William, working alone, said, 'I write the one with the car I keep on writing until I get to write the full-stop'. Darren copied from books 'like the earth one'.

Girls were particularly enthusiastic about this kind of writing. Seven of them said that they often did it. Mona disliked reading, but 'I like copying out of the book...yeah and I like playing teachers.' Leanne seemed to copy on to the text itself, definitely something to do at home ... 'cos you don't do it at school ...if you did it in the books at school you might get into trouble.' 'Copying the words' was often the first thing the children mentioned, when talking about writing. It could be argued that it appealed to them because they did it in a particularly safe context and because they could produce satisfying text for themselves in an economical way.

Children were attracted to writing by the attendant paraphernalia. Craig did not like writing much, but he liked 'having to do cross out all the time with my rubber'. Anna enjoyed fastening pages together with 'sellpage', her version of sellotape. Jonathan liked tracing and remembered that 'if you do a mistake you've got your rubber'. Michael described folding paper and sticking it together to make a book. Making books also fascinated Terry and showed how much he knew about published materials, probably the result of didactic encounters with enlarged texts. His use of the word 'talk' as a substitute for 'write' might indicate that he uses a scribe:

Transcript

Y1 Making a book

Terry I just like drawing the outside of the box like the
 sign and the front cover and the back cover and
 the pages inside. I just like doing a little bit of
 words I just talk two sentences on one page

Five children reported that they wrote stories, as they put it, 'out of my head'. Most of this writing was done at home, though Emma enjoyed school writing 'because it looks dead grown up ...little girls aren't allowed in our class there are just big ones', perhaps a sign of her fast developing social awareness. Their

methods of work ranged from using an adult scribe, through relying on siblings for support, to writing out their name until it covered the page. It is interesting that boys were the majority in this small group, four of the five. This may be because the boys were displaying their confidence and willingness to take risks. It does not match with the observations of 'playing writing' in school where girls were in the majority. However, the boys were quite willing to describe how they went about writing stories. Lee told me what he had written:

Transcript

Y1 Lee's story

Lee I writed a story a long time ago it said once upon
 a time there was a big rider with a crash helmet
 on and he was doing a race and he won and he
 was called Charlie and I don't know what number
 he was....no I think it was number five I don't
 know...I wrote this story in the holidays at home

Altogether there are three of Lee's narratives about bike racing in the data. He was not the only boy who enjoyed narrative.

Discussion

It is clear that the children valued their home writing culture as much as that on offer in school. Indeed they assumed I was asking about home rather than school. Possibly, as a regular classroom visitor, they thought I knew what went on there. Yet even when prompted, talk about school literacy was sparse. Writing was done because 'Miss' demanded it and rarely took 'story' form. Children could choose their own forms and patterns in school only when they 'played writing'. At home writing was voluntary. Only one boy hinted that he felt constrained. He disliked it when his parents 'force it to you', presumably demanding some particular form of writing.

The wide range of writing that children chose to do for themselves was notable. Tools were important. In class the children were enthusiastic about spelling practice because of the individual whiteboards and pens they used. The copying sub-culture was a series of literacy events (Heath 1983) producing satisfying text. As with reading, it was easy for children to form social groups for writing at home. Seven boys and four girls who wrote at home had support from siblings, parents and friends. 'Schools' play was an important factor in initiating writing, one of the social practices of emergent literacy (Heath 1983, Cook-Gumpertz 1986). As James said, 'I write when my sister says do you want to write a story?'

I have outlined some of the issues arising from the first two years of the Literacy Strategy as they occurred in one class of children and their teachers. Implications for the learning of boys have been of particular concern. My original aim was to focus on the classroom, but the children's thoughts about literacy were centred on the home, where their literacies were practised (Hallet 1999). This carries implications for the interface between school and family literacies (Heath 1983, Tizard and Hughes 1984, Purcell-Gates 1995). With the introduction of the Literacy Strategy, they are moving further apart.

Concluding note

In this chapter I have tried to illustrate some of the links between classroom processes and the gendered learning of school literacy. Next I shall concern myself with an evaluation of the methodological aspects of the project.

Chapter 6 Retrospective evaluation: research strategy and methods

Planning

At the outset I tried to make sensible plans which would not overburden the project in terms of workload. My aim was to provide enough time for work in school to observe, interview adults and children and do some negotiated teaching and assessment of pupils. I also needed enough time at home for transcription, writing up and other work including ‘thinking time’. I failed to achieve my aim.

The first reason for this was that I neglected to provide for difficulties such as staff absence and sudden changes in school routine, which included visits from music groups, the police liaison service and so on. I should have remembered my own school experience. ‘Life in school is like that’, remarked one colleague when the matter was discussed. I developed strategies of various kinds to deal with ‘life in school’. When the teacher with whom I usually worked was absent, I worked solely with children, returned home to try another day, or in co-operation with others helped to teach the class. This element of coping with the unexpected began on the first day of work in school at the beginning of the Pilot Project:

Research Journal

YR My first day in school

Arrive in school to begin field work. Reception teacher absent, class being taught by nursery teacher. Deputy headteacher arrives to say no supply is to be obtained. She looks hopefully at me. Nursery teacher and I work with class all day. At least this was one way of getting to know the children.

The second reason was that I badly underestimated the time needed for work at home. Transcription took at least double the time I had planned. Writing up seemed to expand to fill time that was not available. I found it difficult to devise sensible strategies to deal with this.

The result of planning to do too much meant that some parts of the plan proved too ambitious, for example frequent assessment of the children using the Primary Language Record and interviews with parents. Both would have added to the data in significant ways.

Choice of research strategies and methods

In spite of these difficulties, I did not regret choosing an ethnographic strategy. Looking back at the conclusion of that part of the project concerned with data gathering, I was satisfied that my choice of strategies had yielded rich and complex data. I remained satisfied with my research questions, though I tried to bear in mind what my interviews and observations were telling me in terms of adjustment of aims. I did not hesitate to follow up issues arising from the data, even though this sometimes used up extra time. Sometimes I had to make the opposite choice, for example with the data on media texts from children's interviews, for the reasons I have already indicated.

Choice of setting

The setting was chosen because it fulfilled pre-determined criteria, one of which was that it would be within reach in terms of resources and energy. Even though this was the case at the outset, increasing health difficulties with their reduced levels of energy combined with over-optimistic planning to make these aspects of the choice increasingly problematic. For example, because I had planned to do too much, it was not possible to interview the parents of the project class. I have always worked with parents on a partnership basis, so I was conscious of the great loss to the project. Parental interviews would have provided triangulation for the children's interviews, as well as important intrinsic data.

From the beginning of the fieldwork, I became aware that the social mix of the setting had changed since I was a teacher in the school. There had previously been an almost equal mix of children from private and public housing. I soon began to appreciate the difference made by the opening, in the more prosperous part of the area, of a new school, which was now taking some of the more economically advantaged children. This was no great disadvantage to the project, since those left behind, who lived in pleasant public housing, still provided an interesting group with which to work. In the past they would have been called the children of blue collar workers.

The other setting to which I had been offered access and which would have been nearer to hand in terms of resources and energy was even less varied. It served an area of new and established private housing. This school was highly successful in terms of Key Stage 1 SATs results. Here my access would have been through the direct invitation of the headteacher. It was difficult to see how I could work there without becoming identified with her authority and interests. I suspected that I would rapidly have become one of 'them' rather than the 'us' I needed, thus establishing a bias which would have been impossible to overcome.

The selected setting was typical *of its kind* in terms of its SATs results, teaching staff and the social make-up of its surrounding area. It was in respect of its numbers of special needs children, some with sensory impairment, that the school was slightly different. The support given to these children, as they integrated with the mainstream, meant that the staffing of each class was more generous than usual. Over the years the school's policy of inclusion has meant that special needs staff are responsible with the class teacher for *all* the children in the group, whether mainstream or special needs. The contact between adults leads to constant discussion of practice, which I have found to be rare in other establishments. I was able to join in these discussions, both as a researcher and someone experienced in working in this way. My most frequent question was

what difference working together made. The answer that I was most often given was that the mainstream children got slightly more adult attention than they would normally. This should be borne in mind in any discussion of this particular setting.

My choices of strategy and setting were related to each other in basic ways. Of vital importance was my need to blend into the surroundings. I considered that I would to some extent be able to take up my former place as an insider. Teachers would need to be able to relax, as far as possible, with me in their classrooms at the same time as they were working on the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy, a tense time in their careers.

I consider that my choice of setting was in most respects as successful as it was reasonable to expect. It fulfilled my criteria. I had a strong foundation for the personal relationships (Lacey 1976) essential to the strategies I was trying to use. Sometimes there were minor difficulties in personal relationships with those who unquestionably regarded me as an outsider. I learned from these experiences, firstly by working to repair the damage to the particular relationships and secondly by avoiding any kind of personal remark. There was only one respect in which I sometimes regretted my choice of setting. This concerned my own reactions to being an outsider as well as an insider. I shall discuss this later.

Ethical issues

I approached ethical issues with some sense of trepidation. In such a small sample there were bound to be difficulties. Confidentiality was difficult to maintain when quoted remarks were often made in public, for example in staff-room talk or in mutual chat as the classroom was prepared for the next session. I did everything I could to make sure that these remarks were untraceable. In my writing up of early drafts I considered using formal terms throughout, for example referring only to a person's function such as Teacher, Year R. I abandoned this idea because such formality gives an entirely false picture of my

relationships with children and adults throughout the project and because such references would still be identifiable to the small number of participants. Subsequently I have used false given names, as this gives a more accurate impression of adult relationships in the school.

Here the point should be made that adults were prepared to take considerable risks in terms of allowing the reporting of staff room conversations and of interviews, where they were sometimes indiscreet. Although I shared material with them, none asked that remarks should be deleted. Once or twice interviewees asked me to turn off the tape recorder for a few seconds. This I always agreed to do.

I approached the interviewing of children with even greater caution. Parental permission for adult/child interviews had been obtained as part of the verbal agreement I had obtained from parents at the beginning of the project. I took care never to be alone with children when interviews were taking place, so that child protection procedures could be observed. No children refused to be interviewed: I would not have pressed them, had they done so. I shared a little of each recording with the children, either at the end of interviews or on my next visit if time was pressing. In writing up, I ensured that each child had a fictitious given name, making them difficult to identify. Finally I did not use any children's transcript material that identified the child in terms of significant contextual information.

Ease of access

In making my choice of setting, it was essential that access should not be difficult, since I did not have the time to enter into long negotiations. With regard to the chosen setting, I considered that, as a retired member of the school staff as well as a voluntary helper over a long period, I would probably be welcomed by teachers, children and parents. In this way I hoped to make as little impact as possible on the setting. At least a number of the adults would be

able to relax in conversation with me. To others I might be an outsider, particularly to members of staff appointed since I left.

In a sense access was too easy. I was never asked by anyone who could have been called a gatekeeper what I was doing or why I was doing it, except once. This was when I proposed that it would be ethical to write to all the parents in the focus class to request that they give permission for their children to take part in the research. I provided a proforma for this purpose. The headteacher did not think this was necessary. The difficulty was quickly overcome when I volunteered to speak to the parents instead. I did approach the deputy head teacher from time to time to talk about my work. She was able to offer support and suggestions before she left for a new post.

School and Community

Perhaps the most important change in school ethos in the five years since I left has been the overt closing off of the school from its community. The school was provided with specific community areas such as a coffee bar and a community room for activities which included a Mothers and Toddlers group and baby clinic. Perhaps there is some symbolic meaning in the community coffee bar being changed into the new staff room.

Parents and other visitors have been pushed out to the physical boundaries of the establishment. This affected my own feelings about being welcomed into the school. Once I was inside the school, my reception was as friendly as ever and I tended to forget the struggle I had to get there, but I felt diffident about making short visits or visits I had not arranged in advance. Understanding why there had to be some form of surveillance did not seem to make a difference.

The sample

Although my choice of sample class was forced upon me by circumstances that I had not envisaged, it resulted in certain advantages. I was able to collect data from the first week of the children's Year R experience until the end of Year 1. I saw the children develop over five terms and I worked with two teachers and four special needs ancillary workers. I also experienced the first five terms of the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy with a male-dominated class.

I felt that this was a typical experience with a typically difficult group of children, thus adding to possibilities of generalisability. The teachers were also typical of teachers in the early years phase, being women, one a mature entrant with three years' experience, one returning to teaching after child-rearing. Neither was ambitious for more responsibility, having 'more than enough to cope with' (transcript).

One aspect of sampling, which I had foreseen and planned for but later found difficult, was the issue of focus. I am accustomed to early years classrooms and their tendency to break into what seem to be tangled threads of activity. As the research progressed, I became used to thinking of this tendency as if it were a film in the process of being made. As a whole the crowd scenes sometimes made no sense. It was only when an imaginary camera separated the whole into incidents, in which small groups of people were taking part, that meanings began to emerge.

Because one person was pointing the imaginary camera, the choice of what was recorded led to bias. I could only record a certain number of incidents in one session. I have little idea whether these incidents represented an accurate picture of what was taking place, simply because others, taking place at the other side of the teaching space, might have been more representative. Occasionally I was helped by other classroom adults, who reported incidents to

me. In their turn, these might have been biased, but at least I was allowed some kind of choice.

The researcher as participant in the normal setting

‘By participant observation we mean the method in which the observer participates in the daily life of the people under study, either openly in the role of researcher or covertly in some disguised role, observing things that happen, listening to what is said, and questioning people, over some length of time’ (Becker and Geer 1957, p.28 quoted by Denscombe 1998, p.148).

My participation in the daily life of the school was mainly achieved by acting sometimes as a teacher, sometimes as a teacher helper. The other adults were conscious of my role as researcher. To some extent my planned decision to act as a participant observer was bound up with ethical considerations. As a researcher I did not feel that I ever imposed upon the children, but I did feel that I was placing an extra burden on tired and sometimes tense adults. They were happy to co-operate, but their school day was often overcrowded with meetings and servicing the classroom, as well as teaching. The only solution I could see was for me to offer support as a teacher, reading the occasional story or supervising a group of children as they worked. In a sense this was my payment, in return for the consideration offered to me. This had two grave disadvantages. First, it took time away from more formal kinds of observation and secondly, in working as a teacher, I made much more difference to the happenings in the classroom than perhaps I realised. On the other hand I was often able to remember key incidents and note them retrospectively. Very small children expect adults who come to their classroom to teach, or at the very least to help them and their teacher. For example they will approach visiting adults and ask for help with spelling and other tasks.

Participation as observer

I have differentiated 'participation as observer' from 'participation in the normal setting' because I see the former as a much more formal exercise. I use 'participation as observer' to indicate withdrawal from the natural setting into a more solitary role where I acted as observer, typically of the whole class group or of groups of children, and where I offered no interaction. I did this by refusing to have eye contact and by speaking only minimally and when directly addressed. The lack of eye contact and minimal participation in interactions differentiated one kind of participation from the other.

My physical position as I observed classroom happenings had some effects. Sometimes I sat on a low chair at a little distance from the group. In this way I hoped to minimise the effects of my presence. I found that this did not work, since it formalised my role as 'observer'. Often I chose instead to sit on the floor with the children and make my notes immediately afterwards. This had the advantage that I saw things from their point of view. I also found that the children were more relaxed, often continuing their minor misbehaviours. Adults seemed to relax a little too, but this could possibly be attributed to the lack of note taking.

Research role

My role as a researcher was ambiguous. I was an outsider who sometimes imagined that I was still an insider. I began by assuming that my presence carried no threat in professional terms. As the project progressed, I came to realise that this was a comfortable fantasy on my part. Of course adults were anxious. They were aware of my own history of research in literacy and gender. They presumably worried about confidentiality, though this was never expressed in direct terms. One teacher, who was working on a temporary contract, must have been concerned that any breach in confidentiality might be threatening to her status, since she was interested in working permanently in the school. It could be argued that *anyone* who makes notes in the classroom acts as

a threat, raising feelings similar to those teachers share when OFSTED inspectors make their visits.

One teacher I worked with reflected this feeling back as 'guilt'. She considered that the guilt arose from having too much to do in her personal and professional life. The unspoken sub-text was that the presence of other adults in the classroom made this feeling more intense. She had primary age children of her own. There was a constant juggling of home and profession, with the sense that neither was having a fair share of time and attention. She explained how this might have an impact on children:

Transcript

YR *Laura, home and school*

Laura Yes, I feel totally torn in shreds, that nobody gets the best of me, that everybody gets a little bit and my guilt mostly I suppose is with my own children, because I actually think that these children in school get the better bit of me.

Along with this guilt, she described feelings of anxiety about how quickly the children in school were learning, and whether that learning was appropriate:

Transcript continues:

Laura ...yes I carry this enormous guilt all the time. It's as if somebody has gone on to the next class and didn't know so many words or didn't know certain numbers, that I mustn't have taught them right....I just feel as a person guilty that those children have left and they'll never catch up again because they'll be rushed on and expected to do so much more

My arrival could not have done anything except make the expressed guilt and anxiety worse. Sharing and discussing observations was helpful to me, but explanations and justifications were sometimes offered. It is important to note that relationships remained cordial and that the anxiety was sensed rather than stated. To some extent, the feelings were mutual. In my outsider role I sometimes felt a personal sense of rejection, as if I no longer belonged as an insider. I tried to see this as inevitable over the passage of time, but this did not make the situation any easier. Emotional turning back of the clock was impossible. This was the sole way in which I regretted my choice of setting. At least in a more neutral setting and as a complete outsider this would not have happened. It is important to say here that colleagues in the school would have been shocked, had I told them this.

It is impossible to maintain that my presence in the classroom made no difference to the happenings there. My presence was, importantly, diluted by being one of three or four adults, but it probably modified adult behaviour in slight ways.

In other ways I am an insider, who has spent many years in the school and still has a network of friends who work there. This makes me part of a web of relationships which sometimes intrude. I found that I had to keep re-making connections and keep working on my image as a harmless insider.

Throughout the project I never lost my diffidence when making observations of adults. I found this surprising, since I have extensive experience of classroom observation. I sensed their unease and caught their feelings that I was in the room to make judgements, as described above.

There was another unexpected difficulty. The teachers with whom I worked both consulted me for help with the detail of the National Literacy Strategy. This arose from being an insider, rather than a researcher. Some Key Stage 1 teachers knew that I was familiar with the use of enlarged texts and so on. I was

mistakenly looked upon as an expert, sometimes asked for advice, occasionally for demonstration. I resisted, trying to point out that, where the Strategy was concerned, we were all learners together. I became expert in offering polite excuses.

Ways of recording

Observations were made for the most part in the middle of the week and in the morning. This had the advantage of using time when the children were still fresh and not yet tired by the activities of the school day. It meant that only one part of the weekly cycle was observed. For example, I saw no P.E. or music. I did see many examples of the Literacy Hour and the Numeracy Hour.

I found that earlier experience in the observation of small groups was useful and I was satisfied that in groups of up to four I could manage the gist. If I supplemented the observations with the notes in the Research Journal and memos to myself within twenty-four hours, I had a reasonably full picture. Whole class groups were much more difficult. If I concentrated on the general picture, I could manage, especially if I consulted with the teacher afterwards. In the context of whole class groups I found that I could not record everything, but had to be selective. Selection meant that I was recording things important to me, and thus I introduced bias. The obvious solution was electronic recording. This would not have been ideal in that it too is selective, but it would have added another dimension. I had every sympathy with teachers when they asked not to be recorded teaching whole class groups. This fact underlined their anxiety, as outlined above.

In the analysis and reporting of the data, another layer of bias was added. I have analysed the data in certain ways and reported what is important to me. In doing this I have left other things out, sometimes for want of space, sometimes because I could not make sense of certain incidents. Some of these could not be analysed. For example, some of my observations in the playground make no

sense whatever, whilst in others I can see patterns which fit with the main body of data. These choices were purely personal.

Informal tape-recorded interviews with adults

In contrast to their behaviour when being observed in the classroom, I had the sense that adults were prepared to relax during interviews, even though these were being recorded on audio tape. Perhaps they felt that they were no longer on show. This was where my insider status was useful. They often became indiscreet, answering questions that had not been asked, for example discussing matters such as the school hierarchy and their opinions of it. I was careful not to report any of these conversations.

In this sense the adult interviews were successful. I felt I was talking to real people who, in turn, felt their opinions mattered. Allowing adult interviewees to take control was expensive in terms of time. Sometimes it took several half-hour sessions before we came to my priorities. I spent some time considering whether *my* priorities were the right ones and whether following up what was important to them might have led somewhere significant. After second and subsequent readings of the transcripts I decided that this was not so, and that in fact my particular concerns had been addressed.

Informal conversations with adults

I spent many hours in informal talk with teachers and classroom assistants. This talk sometimes took place in the classroom between sessions. Often it took place in the staff room and other teachers joined in. As well as what could be called 'knitting pattern talk', there is a strong tradition of more serious talk in this setting, partly because of the need for special and mainstream colleagues to exchange news and views. Classroom and staff room conversation could also become indiscreet, in spite or perhaps because of my presence. I edited out some conversations, for example where parents were discussed. Others I noted and then allowed the participants full control over whether they could be quoted or not. No-one exercised this control.

Informal interviews with children

I had envisaged that I would take a more dominant role in interviews with children. I should have remembered my teaching experience: four and five year olds conduct their own interviews. Sometimes they were willing to talk around the subject, sometimes they talked about anything and everything else. Sometimes, but rarely, they did not want to talk at all. Occasionally they were more interested in the tape recorder than in me.

Analysis of children's talk was particularly demanding. On a surface level I had to trust them with speaking the truth. Without the triangulation which parent interviews would have given, I had to believe them when they described their reading and writing cultures at home. I did this with some caution, mindful of their tendency to exaggerate in the presence of peers. When I was convinced that this was happening in pair interviews, I interviewed the children for a second time alone. For example, in their accounts of their own use of electronic data in the home, which I decided not to report, it appeared that some of them might be living in a branch of an electronic superstore rather than a house.

Administering the questionnaire

When I decided to use the 'smiley faces' questionnaire (Inner London Education Authority 1988), I made one significant mistake. I had neglected to remember that a smiley face symbol was often used as a message of approval, being stamped or drawn by teachers on children's work. The children were fully aware of its significance, so that when I asked them to put a tick on the face that most closely represented their own degree of liking for certain kinds of reading or writing, they naturally awarded themselves the coveted smiley face. Had I been relying on counting their responses, this would have been disastrous. Fortunately I had piloted the questionnaire with six children in the parallel Year1/Year 2 class and discovered what was happening. I was faced with a situation where these young children were perfectly prepared to put a

tick, after they had asked ‘What’s a tick?’, on a face that implied that they were wholeheartedly in favour of reading alone and that they spent much of their spare time reading. They would then go on to tell me that they never read alone and indeed could not do it. Even if they talked about reading or writing first, *then* put their ticks, their fondness for the ‘smiley face’ persisted. For example here Mark says that he does not like stories and reading is ‘too hard’. He then wants to tick the smiley face:

Transcript

Y1 Mark and reading

JH What about you Mark, do you like reading to yourself?

Mark No

JH You don’t?

Mark (There’s not many stories in) it’s too hard to read

Short discussion follows where Mark says of ‘Cinderella’

Mark Don’t like it

JH Why not?

Mark I don’t like the words

JH I see

Mark They’re too hard

JH OK...if you were going to put a tick on the face that told me how much you like reading to yourself where would you put it?

Mark I’d put mine here (*pointing to smiley face*)

Faced with this difficulty, I had two strategies. I had already planned to foreground the children’s comments on the questions posed. I expanded these discussions, paying attention to what they *said* rather than what they *did*. Secondly, if I found that they did not wish to be deprived of the congratulatory nature of awarding themselves a smiley face, I suggested that they ticked it, but drew ears or a nose on the face that really reflected what they did. I persevered

with the questionnaire, because I considered that the children's participation in this way took away any sense of threat they might have felt when asked questions about literacy. I considered that, had these strategies not been used, their answers to the questionnaire would have been irrevocably biased. Using the strategies meant that some of this bias was countered.

Assessment

From the outset of the data gathering process, I found that using the Primary Language Record (Barrs et al. 1988) to assess the literacy development of the whole class was not practical in the time available to me. This meant that I was obliged to move part of my focus from the assessment and observation of specific children, including those with special needs, to 'incidents', the majority of which, though not all, were 'literacy events' (Heath 1983). One such exception is the 'Christmas Concert' incident, reported because it provides an illustration of power relationships between teachers and parents.

Heath (1983) quotes Anderson et al. (1980) in her definition of 'literacy events'. Here a literacy event is 'any action sequence, involving one or more persons, in which the production and/or comprehension of print plays a role' (p.59). Literacy events are then divided into two types, reading events and writing events. Reading events are those where an individual or group attempts to understand a graphically encoded message. Writing events are those where an individual or group attempts to produce graphic signs.

As I worked to assess and observe what was happening in a busy classroom, I found these definitions helpful. Sometimes literacy events were centred on individuals, but more often they were the concern of groups of children, either working by themselves or with adults. These social interchanges told me a great deal about what children were thinking as they began their journeys into schooled literacy. I was able to use observations gained in this way to give a more rounded picture of children's achievements. An example of the Primary

Language Record completed in this way is given in the Appendices (Appendix 7).

Because my time in school was severely limited, my original plan was over-ambitious. Had I used the Primary Language Record as planned, I would have had much more detailed data on achievement, but much less on classroom processes, my primary focus. I considered that one had to be sacrificed to the other.

Research Journal

The Research Journal developed into several support systems and became one of my most valued resources. After a busy day in school it was sometimes difficult to write it up, but I was always pleased that I had made the effort. In a sense the Journal supported as well as questioned the data.

It was invaluable for planning the next school day (Burgess 1984). These plans sometimes consisted of a list of points to follow up. Of course the plans sometimes went awry, but were always useful for the *next* time when observation or interviewing was possible. The Journal also set the context for many happenings in my field notes, when such a context was impossible to record in the classroom.

One of its most important functions was as a private retreat. After I had shared my observations with adult participants, I recorded my private thoughts in the Journal. Sometimes I recorded Memos to Self in addition to those written at the same time as the field notes.

The Journal also provided the beginnings of analysis, since it allowed me to make an immediate response to the events of the day. Some emerging categories had their origins in the Journal. The entries were often lengthy (see Appendix 9).

Concluding note

In this chapter I have indicated some of my successes and failures with regard to the methodology of the project. In the Conclusion I will reflect more generally on the project as a whole.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

The end is the beginning

At the beginning of my account of this project I stated my aim. This was:

‘to seek to make more evident the relationship between gender, classroom processes and the acquisition of literacy in the early years of schooling’ (p.1).

In this concluding section I will attempt to summarise my findings. I shall also make suggestions for further research and touch on the implications of my findings for literacy work in the early years of schooling. I begin with a general point.

This project has provided a complex picture of young children and their teachers in the first two years of full-time schooling. Two strands predominate, one of which is concerned with the literature of masculinities and achievement (Epstein et al. 1998, Martino and Meyenn (eds) 2001, Skelton 2001). The other takes account of changes in the teaching of literacy and attempts to link the first strand with more specific classroom processes (Barrs and Pidgeon 1993 and 1998, Moss and Attar 1999, Skelton 2001). I will argue that it may be possible to trace some links between the development of masculinities, school achievement and classroom processes, though my first task is to re-emphasise the personal nature of the project.

One person, one view

The project was intensely personal (Woods 1996). The planning, data gathering and analysis were carried out by one person working alone. At each stage the processes were mediated by my own experience and by my reading. The sample was small, one class of children observed over five terms, with a different teacher and classroom assistants in each school year. The children were in their earliest days of full-time schooling. New and more formal ways of teaching literacy were being introduced.

Though the setting was typical in many ways, the presence of children with sensory impairment meant that numbers of adults worked together in the classroom. During the course of this project the usual number was three, a teacher and two assistants. This had three main outcomes. Firstly, adults were used to co-operating together in the teaching space. Secondly, children had slightly more adult attention than in a classroom with one teacher, though it is fair to point out that few early years classrooms would now have only one adult. Thirdly, the children were accustomed to visitors who sometimes used notebooks, so that my presence as a researcher did not seem to cause them a great deal of disturbance. The findings are not likely to be generalisable over large numbers of other settings, though I have tried to use some of Schofield's (1993) suggestions aimed at increasing these possibilities. My next task is to summarise my main findings, pointing out their relationships to the ongoing debate.

The contexts of the early years classroom: school organisation and teacher expectation

Main findings

Organisation of class groups affected teacher expectation. From the beginning of Year R and through Year 1, teachers summed up the project class, which had a majority of boys, in two ways. It was seen as 'difficult' and also as 'less able'. Ability grouping within the class meant that boys gravitated to 'lower ability' working groups, thus encouraging the tendency for the teachers to make strong links between gender and ability.

The literature argues that the position is a much more complex one than this analysis would seem to indicate. Some boys are not achieving as well as some girls. The less successful groups can often be defined in terms of race and social class (Epstein et al. 1998, Pulis 2000, Martino and Meyenn (eds) 2001). In the case of the present sample, it was not possible to define them in this way, since all but two of the children were Caucasian and there was no acute

differentiation in social class within the group as a whole. In addition, 'achievement' is usually defined narrowly through national testing, which may be producing doubtful results (Russell 2002). As I have already noted, Gorard et al. (1999), using statistics derived from SATs, point out that gender gaps in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 English are beginning to narrow.

Arnot et al. (1998) argue that, in the case of older children, '...a greater emphasis on school performance and competition for pupils is affecting how teachers respond to pupils and contributing to a new range of pupil subcultures...' (p.72). It will be recalled that Rogers (1986) points out that, although teacher expectation and pupil progress are difficult to link experimentally, the younger the children are, the more likely it is that low teacher expectation will have a significant effect.

It will be recalled that at the beginning of Year 1 the children at Bankside were divided into class groups using age and teacher assessed ability as criteria. I have stated that there was little overt differentiation in terms of social class, but, as Epstein et al. (1998) have remarked, boys' underachievement in school is a 'strongly classed and racialised phenomenon' (p.11). However it is possible that social class *was* playing a subtle role. Troublesome boys *already seen as less successful and difficult* were placed into what amounted to the 'b' stream at the end of Year 1. It could be argued that their lack of success and poor relationships with their teachers were already making a link between ability and social class within the narrow limits of the Bankside population. Such unconscious judgements on the part of teachers operate from the early stages of learning (Rist 1970). The school may have been acting to reinforce these social stereotypes. It should not be forgotten that social class is still one of the most important determinants of academic success (Mortimore and Whitty 1997).

The effects on classroom processes were far-reaching. For example I saw the work of an able boy dismissed because he was 'immature' and in the 'wrong class'. Teacher irritation and impatience with 'less able' boys were most

obvious when demands were high, particularly when the class task was to compose text for writing. The boys responded by displaying various kinds of strategies which involved resistance, causing their teachers further impatience. Personal relationships between boys and their female teachers were affected in this way, in spite of teachers' consistent reports that they themselves preferred to work with boys. Clearly there is scope for further research into the relationships between young boys and their female teachers and how these relationships might influence learning.

Teachers and stereotypes

Main findings

Boys are discussed more than girls. Boys are uncomplicated, they do not sulk. Above all, they are enjoyable to work with in that they like to chat about what is going on in the classroom. Boys want to win and to have the last word. If they are bored, they are not afraid to show it. They have a marked tendency to immaturity, which teachers seem to define in terms of them being less socially adept than girls. There are hints to the effect that boys who differ from these patterns, for example those who 'get on' with literacy, are not quite 'real boys'.

By contrast girls are not discussed as much. They are more conventional than boys. They are thought of as neat rather than clever. Their less attractive attributes include tendencies to be 'nosy', domineering and sly. It is expected that they will get on with their work and be compliant with classroom instructions. Any deviations from these stereotypes, for example girls who behave badly, cause serious consternation.

As theorised by Epstein et al. (1998), the concepts of 'poor boys' and 'boys will be boys' were still alive and well in the minds of teachers. The difficulties of boys were considered to be extrinsic (Cohen 1998). Here teachers blamed parental influences, such as the toleration of boys' 'natural' aggression. Another commonly held belief was that, given time, boys' achievements would match those of girls. Teachers sometimes made lower demands on boys than

they did on girls. For example, in whole class groups boys were allowed to interrupt, display less attention and conform less to school discourse routines.

In contrast the difficulties of girls were seen as intrinsic. Here the expectation was that they would quickly acquire literacy and practise it quietly in the classroom. The girls themselves were to blame for any deviations from the expected pattern. Uncooperative girls caused consternation verging on dislike, whereas boys who refused to conform were talked about with some fondness.

The ‘interesting child’

Main findings

These children were male, talkative and responsive to adults. Teachers spent much time discussing them with each other. They were encouraged to take up time and attention in whole class groups. Darren was a typically complex case. In private contexts he was interested in written materials, particularly factual texts, and he was developing an interest in spoken narrative. Paradoxically his teacher did not consider that this ‘counted’ as literacy, though it gained him much attentive approval. The ‘interesting child’ was one aspect of teachers’ unspoken assumption that boys do not need to display progress in literacy to have ‘flair’. There is an abiding tendency to think that boys will soon reveal their abilities, that it is just a matter of waiting for this to happen.

‘Interesting children’ were clear examples of the theory of ‘poor boys’ mixed with a dash of ‘boys will be boys’. There was one difference. Epstein et al. (1998) emphasise that ‘poor boys’ are identified as victims of mothers, teachers and other harmful female influences. In the discussions about these children that I noted, male parents and grandparents were blamed by teachers for neglecting boys’ early literacy. Instead they were seen as encouraging their boys to look at science-based texts, which fell outside teachers’ own definitions of school literacy.

Here is an important point. This paper has in some regards been critical of the National Literacy Strategy, but it is clear that, in this case, teachers' confusion about what should and should not be considered as non-fiction does not lie within the Strategy itself. In its Framework for Teaching (DFEE 1998) a Summary of the Range of Work for each term of Year R and Year 1 (p.66) clearly indicates in some detail 'non-fiction' texts that must be included. The examples provided are environmental print of various types, non-chronological reports and dictionaries and recounts of observations, visits and events.

It is possible that teachers' confusion about scientific texts dates from the past when science and literacy were more strictly separated areas of the curriculum. I regret that I did not have time to collect more data on this interesting point. Investigation into teachers' ideas as to what constitutes the non-fiction area of the literacy curriculum would provide more reliable data.

Management issues

Main findings

Teachers are more forgiving of the difficulties created by boys than they are of those created by girls. Teachers manage whole class groups by encouraging boys to speak. This encouragement takes the form of glance, of questioning by name, and of using questioning as a form of control.

When boys were permitted to take centre stage in whole class group work, they were learning important lessons. They were learning to speak first and think later. Secondly, they were learning that their teacher assumed that they had a right to be heard over and above the girls. Thirdly, they were perhaps learning that their own concerns and interests were more important than those of the girls, and, by implication because she was also female, those of their teacher.

More directly, teachers' management of whole class groups was central to encouraging boys' ideas about who had the right to speak. Teachers asked boys more direct questions, as pointed out by Swann and Graddol (1993). When they

analysed Edwards and Mercer's 1987 data from the point of view of gender, they found that the teacher's glance was an important way of signalling who should speak next (p. 159). Questioning used as a means of direct control, for example questioning those creating minor disturbance, was an important way of allowing boys to take the floor.

Coping strategies

Main findings

Children practised coping strategies from their earliest days in school. Some were particularly complex. Boys were expert in their design and use. Such strategies included evading teacher demands by ignoring instructions, wasting time, indulging in short bouts of play, and asking other children how to complete a task. They knew how to avoid tasks they did not intend to complete by finding some activity approved by adults, for example looking at books.

Coping strategies, defined as the strategies children bring into play as part of classroom survival (Woods 1977), sometimes masked gendered behaviours and outcomes. For example boys questioned girls about immediate tasks and frequently copied from their work. This emerged as a consistent pattern when the children were working in groups of mixed gender.

The effect on classroom processes was straightforward. In terms of literacy assessment, patterns were difficult for the teacher to trace. Observation in context was the only way of finding out what individual children knew and could do. By relying on other children to supply what they found difficult, some children, of whom the majority were boys, avoided overt conflict (Pollard 1987). In doing this they also successfully masked what they could not do, thus opting out of demonstrating their lack of proficiency (Moss and Attar 1999). In this way they also negotiated social relationships with their teacher.

Male and female subjectivities

Main findings

Observation in the playground, cloakrooms and other lightly supervised areas went some way towards supporting Thorne's (1993) findings that the organisation and meaning of gender varied with context. Though gender subjectivities were evident in the classroom, for example in terms of curriculum preferences and boys' tendency to dominate classroom interaction (Clarricoates 1987a), the expression of these subjectivities was slightly more marked in lightly supervised areas. Indeed the expression of gender subjectivities often seemed the only purpose for some actions, displaying their importance for the children. When the expression was overt, adults intervened to check it.

This is in contrast to the work of Thorne (1993) and Clarricoates (1987b). Sometimes these direct interventions did not succeed, for example in reducing 'play' fighting in the playground.

The fact that teachers *always* intervened when these expressions were overt gives rise to the idea that the adults were aware of direct difficulties caused by gender and sexuality. School adults seemed less sure of how to deal with the other results of the developing masculinities of boys in their class. For example adults made little effort to prevent boys' domination of oral work in whole class groups (French and French 1984, Swann and Graddol 1993, Fisher 1993), rather, as I have pointed out, giving it tacit approval.

'Bad lads': the development of resistance

Main findings

Boys' resistance in whole class sessions moved from fidgeting and inattention in Year R to more active strategies in Year 1. By the age of six, these strategies held the seeds of 'having a laugh' (Willis 1977). Children behaved in a circumspect fashion with the male authoritative figure of the head teacher. 'Naughty' children were readily identified by their classmates as male. Social

negotiation with the teacher and other members of the class was an important function of resistance.

The teacher of the Year R class, with its majority of boys, considered the whole class to be badly behaved after a week in full-time schooling. In the context of whole class work within the Literacy Hour, boys' resistance consisted of giving 'silly' answers to questions, making inappropriate noise and ignoring school discourse routines. 'Having a laugh' (Willis 1977) was just beginning to be socially important to them, so that, in spite of having the attention of the teacher and the class, it is possible that more social bonding than learning was taking place. The boys were negotiating social links with each other and the teacher. Teachers complained that boys were difficult to motivate in these sessions. It could be argued that the teacher and children were not only ignoring each other's overt agendas but were also collaborating to negotiate the patterns of social life in the classroom, just as Thorne (1993) discovered them to be doing in the playground.

Gender, classroom processes and the acquisition of literacy

I have argued that much of boys' indifference to school literacy, as reported by teachers, may be the result of classroom processes introduced as part of the National Literacy Strategy, some of which removed ownership of the learning process from both boys and girls. I now need to return to these arguments. To do this, I shall compare and contrast the children's reported literacy experiences in their homes with those in school.

What counts as literacy?

As I gathered data for this project, I spent many hours sitting uncomfortably on the floor as a member of Literacy Hour groups of various sizes. I observed children's behaviour and learning *from their point of view*. I tried to put myself in their place as new learners of school literacy. How far did classroom teaching match up with what they could be presumed to know? Or, as Meek (1988) asks, 'What counts as literacy?'

Main findings

In school, literacy is owned by adults. The practice of literacy is dictated by the National Literacy Strategy. Children are given almost no practical choice regarding the use of texts in either reading or writing. The only exception is occasional 'play' writing.

The separation of literacy from the lives of young children could be illustrated by the lack of time allowed in school for its practice. Both classrooms had book areas with reasonable provision in terms of story books, though teachers seldom shared them with the children, unless the purpose was didactic. As Wells (1987) has pointed out, experience in sharing stories is linked with success in the early stages of literacy (pp.151 and 152). The lack of time for the sharing of narratives was therefore a serious gap in the literacy curriculum, as practised in the school. Factual texts were stored some distance away in the school's central library. Private reading was so rare that I was unable to use it as a separate category in my analysis. When asked in casual conversation what reading was for, boys and girls commonly replied, 'It's so you can learn to read.' What counted as literacy was learning to do it, rather than using or enjoying it. In this respect, ownership of school literacy was firmly lodged with the teacher. These findings follow those of Moss (1998), who worked with seven to nine year olds. She comments on the 'extent to which school literacy defines what literacy is ...and indeed becomes central to the way in which (children) think about reading at home and at school' (unnumbered page).

The children 'did' their literacy in the prescribed hour. Throughout the five terms of my observation, story was always didactic and chosen by the teacher. I saw no evidence of children being allowed choice in any area of the literacy curriculum. The teacher assigned all texts and tasks. Writing was largely confined to worksheets, though there was some independent work of high quality from the children when they created text for their own purposes (Clay 1975).

Reading

Main findings

Some children said that they did no reading or writing at home. The majority of these were boys. Those who did read chose a variety of printed texts such as comics and other items often defined as 'popular culture'. A small number of boys liked factual texts with a scientific basis. 'Looking at the pictures' was important for those who were not independent readers. Narrative was important to these young children. They made few distinctions between genres. Choice of reading partners was wide and included both male and female adults and older and younger siblings.

I had designed interviews to probe children's attitudes to reading and writing in school. Apart from registering a vague discomfort, for example reporting that reading to adults was 'scary', the children insisted on talking about their home literacies. Just as Nias (1991) found, I was being told something different from what I thought I wanted to know. In answering my questions in this way, the children may again have been reflecting their sense of lack of ownership of school literacy.

Aside from those children who 'never' practised literacy at home, of whom the majority were boys, the children's wide-ranging choices support this argument. Their devotion to media texts based on popular culture, such as comics and books produced by companies as marketing devices, was a choice which was certainly not available at school. At home, not only could they choose these gendered texts, they could also choose reading partners who might range in age from younger siblings to grandparents.

Certain patterns were apparent. There were two boys who enjoyed science texts designed for older children and others who said they liked looking at pictures of 'dinosaurs and all that'. They were explicit about why this happened. They could not read the words, so they looked at the pictures. Yet the majority of

boys enjoyed narratives when other people read to them. Several constructed narratives as they spoke. It is the finding of other researchers (Millard 1997, Moss 1998) that boys strongly prefer science based texts at seven, eight, nine and thirteen. Moss (1998) argues that the children she studied were opting out of displaying their lack of reading proficiency. Could it be argued that this is something that they learn as a result of 'scary' reading to adults in Key Stage 1? Millard (1997), on the other hand, argues that it is the literacy curriculum which does little to catch the interest of boys. In this project it seemed that very young boys' preferences were by no means as fixed as either Moss or Millard suggest for older male pupils. Indeed their ideas of what constituted factual or narrative texts were uncertain. This may not be unexpected in view of their ages and degree of reading proficiency. More research, for example a repetition of Moss's project, this time working longitudinally with children from every primary year group from Year R to Year 6, might throw more light on this interesting matter.

Writing

Main findings

Writing at school was largely focused on worksheets tied in detail to the stages of the National Literacy Strategy. Some children did no writing at home. In scarce play time in the classroom children expressed themselves more freely. Teachers were often either not aware of or dismissive of this writing. At home, writing experiences were varied. A particular practice involving the copying of text from books was popular. Siblings provided important support.

Experiences with writing at home were just as varied as those with reading. Some children said that they never did any writing, except at school when their teacher demanded it. Others had a flourishing writing culture at home, ranging from covering the page with their name to the invention of stories and books. The presence of adults and siblings of varying ages was important to them in the direct support it offered. The project children reported that siblings often initiated literacy events (Heath 1983). When working with younger siblings,

children could assume the role of expert and teacher. The significance of the children's fondness for copying text from books needs further investigation and could form the basis of a future research project.

In the foregoing section I have summarised my findings. I have also listed possible areas for future investigation. I shall now go on discuss the implications for schools.

Equity programmes and their problems

Skelton (2001) and others, including Davies and Banks (1992) and Francis (1998), warn that no school equity programme should concentrate on boys alone. Past experience would seem to point to problems in the implementation of this kind of policy. One problem is that such policies, which have often been aimed at older children, do not provide detailed guidance. For example, equity programmes which focused on girls alone tended to ignore the *differences* between groups *within* the gendered definition 'girls'. Arnot et al (1998) point out other difficulties, such as gender differentiation in SATs being the main drive behind such programmes.

Many equity programmes (Hannon 1999) draw on conservative and men's rights perspectives, emphasising biological differences between boys and girls (Skelton 2001). Many such equity programmes work from wide perspectives which are not very helpful for teachers trying to sort out more subtle approaches in the early years classroom. Most importantly of all, equity programmes have been seen to fail. Skelton (2001) makes the basic point:

'After all, if they had worked we would not today be talking about boys' underachievement because one of the perspectives in that debate is how boys do not relate to traditionally gendered areas of the curriculum such as reading and writing' (p.29).

An alternative to such programmes might be based in teachers' shared awareness and understanding of their own classroom contexts.

Bankside School: an illustration of possibilities for change

It should be possible for adults in the primary school community to reach negotiated agreement on the key areas in which change might be possible, beginning with the most important question of all. A suitable format is identified by Skelton (2001), who quotes Francis (2000 p.129): 'Do we want boys to change?'

The 'boys will be boys' scenario is sometimes regarded with amusement. The era of the 'right lad', far from passing, is still in full bloom. Teachers quote with smiling faces the 'mischievous' behaviour of the boys in their classes. 'Loveable villains' populate television comedy and magazines for young men. There is evidence (Mac an Ghail 1994, Clarricoates 1987b, Pollard 1985, Connolly 1995) that boys invest considerable effort in acquiring 'cool' behaviour. The observations of boys learning to 'have a laugh' (Willis 1997) in this study support this evidence. It is likely that, having invested so much in establishing a 'cool' image which has met with some approval from school adults, boys would resist attacks upon it (Skelton 2001).

It would not be practical or desirable to suggest wholesale changes aimed at such attacks on the self-concepts of boys or girls. Yet it might be agreed that it would be beneficial for all children if Bankside classrooms changed in two respects.

We have seen how aggressive and domineering behaviours, mostly on the part of boys, are sustained by the institution. This sustenance is provided by adults. For Bankside, therefore, one key factor would be the identification of 'the dominant image of masculinity it constructs and the kinds of masculinities operating within the school site' (Skelton 2001, p.166). Aside from the stereotyped views of teachers, no real consideration had been given to these

dominant forms and of the strategies that could have been devised to counteract them. To take one example, the contradiction between the apparent indifference of some boys to early literacy experiences in school and the domineering behaviours of boys in whole class groups had not been questioned.

The second desirable area of change would be for all children to be encouraged to relate to the mandatory literacy curriculum in more positive and active ways, which allowed them to make choices and take responsibilities within their own literacy learning. I shall discuss this in more detail below.

These positive moves would take some time to achieve. They would begin with a journey of self-discovery on the part of adults, similar to the one which I underwent at the start of this project.

The teachers at Bankside already possessed some of the relevant knowledge, for example in terms of the growth of masculinities and femininities. They were trying to keep extremes of gendered behaviour in check in the classroom and playground. With regard to the literacy curriculum, they were also working hard to provide literacy experiences which they had been assured were appropriate. Three key issues thus emerge:

1. the exploration of different kinds of masculinities operating within the school site and of their effects on classroom happenings;
2. the exploration of the relationship between these masculinities and the acquisition of literacy in the earliest years of full-time schooling;
3. the introduction of training programmes to support teachers and ancillary staff in carrying out such investigations and implementing necessary action.

Moving forward

Frameworks already exist for adding to adult knowledge, both in terms of the operation of gender subjectivities within classrooms and close examination of the working of the literacy curriculum. The Primary Language Record (PLR)

provides suggestions for the observation of children's literacy. Its thrust is towards a formative pattern of assessment. These formative techniques offer knowledge about what every child knows and can do, since they are based on 'normal behaviour in favourable contexts' (Barrs 1990, p.34). They also offer attention to equality of opportunity, including gender. The PLR has space for notes on the operation of speaking and listening which, taken together, provide a pattern of gendered behaviours in different contexts. There is also the valuable addition of space for literacy conferencing with parents, which provides evidence of what is taking place outside the classroom. One challenge for teachers would be to create opportunities for formative assessment within the boundaries of a prescribed literacy curriculum. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (1999) urges that such opportunities should form part of normal classroom practice.

QCA (1999) also offers useful suggestions and examples for teachers who are trying to examine their own practice. Its bias is towards quantitative assessment. The section on 'curriculum targets' (p.5) suggests a curriculum audit which examines provision.

The narrow scope of the literacy curriculum, as provided in the early years classes of Bankside School, was a further issue. A curriculum audit would go some way towards improving all children's access to every area of the National Literacy Strategy, for example story for enjoyment. Attention to equity policies would be needed, since they are not a specific focus of this QCA document.

Development of these ideas through discussion and the exchange of examples, with the participation of all staff, would help towards the construction of common attitudes and policies. Practical suggestions are available from the literature. For example Skelton (2001) discusses the work of MacNaughton (2000 p.153), who suggests strategies which open up discussions with boys, though parallel strategies could be equally well used with girls. His suggestions include exploring different ways of being masculine and considering how

different choices bring their own consequences. In relation to this, he advises the checking of violence and aggression and the support of those who are not violent. He also suggests discussion about what it means to be courageous and strong in differing contexts.

Working within a supportive environment, it should be possible for teachers to use assessment frameworks as a basis for change. What follow are some suggestions, all of which could be discussed within the framework of the National Literacy Strategy. All are aimed at children taking a more active role in owning their own literacy. They focus on differing parts of the literacy curriculum and could form the basis for initiating change within the whole.

Focusing on the literacy curriculum

The curriculum: talk

This research project has demonstrated the difficulty of working with young children in whole class groups. Teachers might begin by trying to discover what is happening in their own classrooms. For example, there are simple techniques for discovering who is doing most of the talking in whole class group sessions. Such techniques could form part of training programmes. It is likely that, in groups of mixed gender, boys or adults are dominating. With the help of another supportive adult, for example an ancillary colleague, such patterns might be revealed. Once these are adopted as a matter of discussion amongst school adults, intervention to support children is a step nearer.

My research found that, within the Literacy Hour large group sessions, children were adopting a passive stance. It should be possible for all young children to be more active. For example, as part of whole class sessions, simple games could be devised in which they could take part. Such active methods have been a notably successful part of the National Numeracy Strategy (Department for Education and Employment 1998).

The curriculum: reading and writing

As stated above, I found that curriculum provision in literacy was narrow in scope. A curriculum audit which examined different contexts in literacy would quickly reveal gaps, for example in planning. Children could take part in such an audit. It should be possible to ask the children what is already available and for them to make suggestions about what is needed. My research demonstrated that children's reading at home is of a much wider range than that available in school. Children might like to ask for comics and other texts from popular culture to be included in order to provide a bridge between home and school literacies. My research showed that children attached a particular kind of threat to graded readers. This is something that teachers might profitably discuss. A variety of factual texts could also be provided, including those that are not mediated for young children.

Writing materials could be provided for use throughout the day. Again the children themselves will have ideas about what might be needed. Marsh (2000) has pointed out the value of fantasy settings for writing. These might include writing places based on super hero themes, hospitals and shops. Children will have their own suggestions, both for themes and equipment needed. Their fondness for copying texts might also be considered. Steps could be taken to improve the learning possibilities of this activity, which I found was enjoyed by boys as well as girls. For example 'talk-about' sessions could highlight the importance of technical details such as consistent left to right behaviours and correct letter formation.

In addition the use of elements of popular culture, including television programmes, as a focus for writing is advocated by Hilton (1996) and Marsh (1999). From the data I gathered on electronic texts and chose not to report, it was clear that these texts provided an important part of the children's home experiences. Bringing such texts into school in the form of a literacy focus would help to bridge the gap between literacy at home and at school.

The curriculum: time

My research found that the narrowing of the literacy curriculum could be based on teachers' mistaken impression that they were bound by constrictions of time. A curriculum audit based on questioning the allocation of time could reveal more scope for change than they supposed. A great deal of time was spent in questionable ways.

Less time could be spent on the kinds of worksheets which Edelsky (1996) defines as 'NOT- literacy' and this time could be used for the more widely based writing activities described above. Young children's own initiatives, for example copying and the making of books, could be accepted and encouraged.

Short periods of time, for example whilst waiting for registration and for other children to finish work, could be used for private reading and writing. In addition, a more dedicated period of time could be found each day for this purpose, for example by shortening the time spent on registration, assembly or preparations for moving around the school building. The particular class I observed, for example, spent much time 'lining up'. This gave these 'difficult' children much scope for disruptive behaviour, much of it male initiated.

The importance of sharing story and other texts in a non-didactic fashion might be recognised. Children could be given the responsibility for sometimes choosing texts for the adult to share in whole group sessions or to read themselves to other children. Toys, for example dinosaurs or bears who 'love reading', could also provide an audience. Commercial and home-made tape recordings kept with the appropriate texts could have an important role to play in familiarising children with the available book stock, thus providing a basis for choice.

Concluding note

As part of my negotiated teaching throughout the duration of the project I was often asked by teachers to share a story with the children. On one occasion, a

few weeks after the beginning of Year R, I was gathering the children together after lunch when I realised that John was not part of the group. He was busy at the other side of the room playing with Lego. I explained that we were about to choose and read a story and requested that he please join the other children. He looked at me in some surprise. 'Boys don't listen to stories', he said. On some occasions, as Skelton (2001) indicates, intervention could be as easy as pointing out the evidence before the children's eyes.

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Appendix 1: Adult interview schedule

- The interview is arranged on the previous visit to the school.
- The adult is asked to choose and think about 4 children in the class, 2 girls and 2 boys.
- At the start of the interview, the adult tells the interviewer the names of the chosen pupils.
- The interview is framed by the adult's selection of pupils.

Appendix 2: Example of teacher interview

Laura Talks about Children

Transcript notes

Laura had been teaching the Reception class for about ten weeks when this tape was made towards the end of the autumn term. She has thirty two children in all two of whom are statemented as being hearing impaired and two visually impaired. Jane and Mollie are the Special Needs assistants.

The tape was made one lunchtime in a quiet bay of the classroom. There is faint background noise.

JH Can you just talk about Darren for a few minutes for me?

What's your impression of Darren?

Laura Darren is a very interesting child

JH Yeah?

Laura Erm he's got lots of general knowledge and enjoys lots of things that aren't concerned with what we would th- what we would term education in that he's not interested he doesn't appear to be interested at all in any of our number work or our literacy science he adores science d/t he always wants to be the best very competitive

JH Yes?

Laura Always wants to be number one and anything anybody has he's had but got ten times better

JH Yes

Laura Erm he's not at all interested in any of our erm Christmas activity things or singing or anything but will talk we did oh I meant to tell you this yesterday we did it last week erm we flew our kites we finally flew our kites

JH You flew your kites yes

Laura We put the string on them and flew them and and when we

came back in we asked them about flying the kites and he said his had taken him across the water so everybody was very quiet and it was the end of the day and we said where did it take you Darren and he said well it took me to America and we said what did you do there he said well I found a house and I lived in it and I said how did you live in this house on your own he said well I was able to make the food and I went to the store and bought some more and erm Mrs. P. tried to catch him out she said well what was your teacher's name he said he went to school Mrs. P. said what's your teacher's name and erm he told her, no he didn't tell her Mrs S said who did you go to school with and how did you know their names and he said well just because I'm very clever really I knew their names and then Mrs P. said what was your teacher called and he thought a moment and then Mrs P. said and what was your teacher called and he thought long and hard you could see him thinking all these other children were absolutely engrossed and he said erm mmm I don't know her name and then dismissed that question didn't want to know anything more about that and then we said well what happened then he said well I just got on my kite and came back home again and he said he didn't miss his Mammy and Suzy when he was there and erm they didn't miss him but when he came back it was quite nice to be back home and this went on for about ten minutes at the end of the day and he was absolutely enthralled by it but if we had said to him during the day would you like to write a story about going on a kite like you know going I don't think he would have been interested at all but to have made the kite first of all and taken it out tried to fly it and thought about it he's a hands on child definitely

JH Yes

Laura Definitely hands on

JH What's this what's this with him never listening an erm

Laura Well he appears not to listen

JH Yes

Laura He shuffles constantly he looks blankly everywhere but at whoever's doing the input he fidgets he knocks people behind him he can't sit still he doesn't respond at all to any class if the class are actually responding to anything that we're doing in literacy for instance if they're reading he does not voluntarily do that he has to be asked to do that and when he's asked to do it he can do it so he has been listening well we think he's listening but it doesn't appear so it wouldn't appear so to an outsider at all or if you were to look in on the group you'd think that child's just disruptive 'cos he's just fidgeting and moving around and flapping about and rubbing his eyes and looking everywhere but at the adult

JH Do you know what Lilian said to me this morning? He got up to go to the loo when all the children were in the Hall

Laura Oh yes

JH And she said 'Does he belong to mainstream?'

Laura Did she? Well he looks like that doesn't he because he says to us 'I'm desperate to go to the toilet can I go to the toilet?' and we say 'Yes Darren you can go to the toilet' and then it takes him ten minutes to get up and he has a little look around the group then he decides how he is going to get out of where he is and who he is going to stand on then he stumbles over everybody and then he just sort of flaps his way to the toilet in his own sweet time so he's not actually been desperate in the beginning and sometimes I think it's just because he's fed up with what's going on in the area and he'll just go and have a little nose around

JH Can you remember what his baseline assessment was like?

Laura I can't but I can get it. Do you want me to get it?

JH No not this minute

Laura But yes it was the pencil control all his pencil control was very poor scissor control was appalling and his fine manipulative skills were bad very poor erm when he first came in as well he was very dis he was much more disruptive vocally than he is now he's learnt that if he keeps quiet and keeps his head down he's not noticed as much as if he's noisy or punching or pushing so he's developed yeah he has actually hasn't he he's developed this little facade of just sitting quietly in the group somewhere where he hopes he's not going to be noticed and fidgets quietly now whereas in the beginning he was quite disruptive vocally and was always pushing and shoving somebody around

JH Do you think his pencil control's improving?

Laura Yes yes his pencil control's improved amazingly and I think his parents are I think his mother's doing quite a bit with him at home actually

JH Mmm

Laura and he can write recognisable letters now especially for 'Darren' and he can actually copy erm some letters off the board and he can tell you what a lot of the letters are now they're not necessarily the letters we've learnt

JH No

Laura through our work but he's obviously learning them picking them up at other times in other ways and I think he is picking up words he's just he's disinterested really he doesn't want he doesn't see any reason to read a reading book why should he want to read about Rosie and Mo really he's not. Having said that I'm now going to contradict myself 'cos when you actually sit down and talk about the book he will he loves to talk about the book on a one to one but he's not interested

in the words that make the story he's just interested in the pictures and telling you the story at this stage and he deliberately withholds his book bag and tells you he's forgotten it and he's not he's done that several times erm tells us he's left it at mash and he doesn't doesn't like to go to mash this after school club told us frequently he doesn't like to go and and absolutely over the moon when his father came for him one day his father's only been once to pick him up this term his mother brings him every morning and he was just like his face lit up

JH So there is a two parent family

Laura Yes there is and there is a grandad who obviously does a lot with him he's very fond of his grandad he talks a lot about his grandad and he's obviously very fond of his dad and his mum as well though he said in America he didn't miss Suzy when was there but erm

JH They're the other persons in the family

Laura Yes yes he talks a lot about his grandad and he was so thrilled this day his dad came for him and a lot of it as well had to do with he wasn't going to mash 'cos he never gets to go out the door that the other children go out he's only gone out it once this term so he's always been shuttled out the other door towards mash

JH That matters to them

Laura I think it does yes because that makes him different doesn't it and he doesn't like in his own little way he doesn't he wants to be one of them, he definitely wants to be one of them but on his rules and his grounds and he wants to be the best of the group that he's with

JH What about Mona?

Laura Erm very quiet child who does everything that we ask of her and pays attention and does the work seems to do the work to

the best of her ability and is only forthcoming with information and discussion when it's about her daddy

JH Yes

Laura And becomes very animated when she talks about her daddy and the things her daddy does with her and other than that we would never know anything and her ducks they have ducks and chickens I think at home and she likes to talk about her ducks and chickens but other than that we don't know what goes on at home she seems quite a solitary child in that you don't often see people fighting to sit beside her or fussing over her she's always sitting she's very controlled she looks (a) very controlled child in the group as if she's just suddenly got independent and yet I would never say she's on her own you know when she's playing yes she's she's she always looks like you know I think she gives off this aura of don't come near me as well with the other girls doesn't she and boys because they all like want to fuss over each other and she doesn't she's quite a solitary little thing

JH This morning in the playground she was by herself by the wall for quite a long time

Laura Was she?

JH But then later on she played with one maybe two other children girls and she talked to them and smiled and was very sociable

Laura She's a very pleasant little child and gives her best she does do her best at everything she does and she was on IEP when she came into reception which I took her off in the first few weeks because her baseline as far as I could see erm even within the first three or four weeks was that she settled well she mixed well and that she was doing everything and more that was asked of her and her IEP was for under-achievement and I

didn't feel she was she certainly holds her own (as much as) the other children

JH She's very physically contained isn't she?

Laura She is yes she is

JH Highly unusual in that way because little children are usually all over the place but she's totally physically contained in a rather strange way

Laura Mmm she is I've never heard I've never heard her talk about playing at home with her sister or playing with her friends if she if anything happens outside it's always daddy and she although she did tell us that mummy showed her a pram she'd got for Christmas she showed it to her then put it away again which seems strange to me but who knows what other people do and she doesn't . I'm trying to think what she actually chooses when there's choosing time what she

JH She likes the home corner

Laura She does does she she likes it in there? We don't have that up a lot do we? In fact they don't get a lot of time to choose in the mornings anyway do they when we're on a roll in the mornings

JH No not noticeably they don't do they

Laura And it's going to be worse because when the other group come in here we're only going to have these two afternoons for outside

JH Yeah

Laura (Yeah

JH (For outside your actual teaching bit?

Laura Yeah yeah this bit yeah they'll only be able to come out two afternoons

JH Can you erm can you say a few words about Michael?

Laura (laughs) Michael. he's obviously around grown ups a lot of the time at home he speaks his vocabulary is it's I don't like

(isn't it) way he talks to us and talks to the other children he's a funny boy I think he spends a lot of time with grandad

JH Yes

Laura Erm grandad looks after a him a lot and I talked to grandad recently and it's he that does a lot of this hands again Michael is a hands his drawing and his DT work and his artwork are exceptional for his age they're absolutely wonderful

JH Yes

Laura amazing detail but if he has to do work where there's some written work and some drawing he will spend the whole session doing the drawing and not attempting the () and I actually think he can do more in the written work than we've seen yet I think he is capable of more than has come out yet he's now he's not a child that I have seen mix easily either he actually has his own little group of friends but I've not seen him he's not one that just mixes in with any group at all but then sometimes you can not see these children for a few days can't you you know they're there but your minds on other things they're

JH They're so little and so many aren't they?

Laura Mmm erm he he's got quite a good sense of humour actually but Darren's got quite a good sense of humour you get ()

JH Yes he laughs at the jokes doesn't he?

Laura He's got an adult sense of humour hasn't he because not very many of them see a lot of the jokes in the or a more mature sense of humour Michael erm he's quite a controlled child as well really isn't he in his own way he doesn't show emotion easily (you see) if I get frustrated because he doesn't speak clearly an' he doesn't speak clearly a lot of the time he speaks though his teeth mmmmer and so I say Michael speak clearly open your mouth when you're speaking and he just does it the way I've asked he doesn't show any emotion unless I've

actually chastised him in front of people he just goes and gets on and does it erm he's just he would be quite happy just drawing all day long I think (sitting)

JH And how is he developing do you think since he came into school with his ability to use a pencil?

Laura Well he's just well he's wonderful that's it really erm I think it's just been there all the it's obviously just been there a long long time well what I think is developing is his thoughts behind what he's doing because he's not only drawing something he's then taking it a step further he thought of how to make a toy recently he made the toy in the glueing area himself then took it home and redesigned it stronger at home and asked his mother and his grandfather to find him other pieces so he is thinking about the things more and when we made things like the kites or the (flights) he his input is very important but in fact having said that of all the children in the class in the science DT activities the (flights) and the kites it's been Mona this is actually quite interesting now that you come to it it's been Mona who has done the most precise work carefully and precisely and has got on with it absolutely independently and has carried it out and Darren who's talked the most about it all and wanted to hasn't been able to do the manipulative parts as successfully as everybody else in fact made quite a hash of them but has got where he wanted to in the end and Michael who's done the most productive of the planning and the preparation and the ones that work successfully but if anybody had just said to me now talk about the children making a (kite) those are the three I would have and if you ask Jane or Mollie I bet they're the three because we were astounded by the er Mona's patience and skill and independent work by Darren's absolute sort of intrigued by the whole thing and the development and Michael just

because he's good at it ()

JH I will ask Jane and Mollie and

Laura (That would be interesting actually

JH (to get er another point of view so that you and I are not agreeing about anything that they might see differently

Laura Mmm yeah yes it would be interesting

JH And Carlie Carlie's never at school

Laura No no I pointed that out to Mr. W.. the other day we're a bit concerned about her attendance now and when she comes I don't see mother I don't see her bring her in and when I ask her in the afternoon what's been wrong with her she'll say oh she's had a tummy ache or she's had this and I say I need a note and I actually got a note the other day for all of last week but it was three odd days and it was sickness and diarrhea she's a child who just craves attention but she's a very I think she's a bright she's a streetwise child and she's quite manipulative she can manipulate others and us to do what she wants she tries very hard to but she's desperate to have us cuddle her and to if there's an adult sitting near her and she's working with them she will sidle up to them to be near them bodily contact erm she can actually produce better work than she's doing as well because all day she shows lovely pencil control

JH So do you think better attendance might (help)?

Laura Yeah yes and concentration her mind's not she's very tired all the time she's always tired and we asked I asked Mum to take her to the doctor's and have her checked out because she was so tired at one point that we were very worried about her and she hasn't she doesn't seem to be as tired we're not sure whether anything's actually come of the er doctor's appointment Mother said she did take her her mother was concerned that she might have diabetes because her

grandmother has it but we've not heard anything more about that and she's not in enough really to see whether she's that tired or not now so erm she's always got an answer Carlie where she's been or what she's been doing

JH She seemed to me when she was here to be erm quite cheerful with the other children

Laura Oh yes and I think she enjoys being at school I think she likes the social contact she's a sociable little girl and she likes to organise and she's actually settled in very well because she didn't go to the nursery she didn't know any of the other children here before she started school and she came in late

JH Mmm

Laura So actually has settled really well but she's obviously dealt with situations like that before in her life because that didn't seem to be a problem to her at all coming to somewhere new in fact the first morning Mr. W.. brought her round to view the school and they said she was coming the next week I said to her mum and Carlie would Carlie like to stay then like at eleven o'clock in the morning Carlie her mother didn't answer Carlie said oh yes I would and just stayed and was quite happy from then on because I think she could achieve a lot more if she was here a lot more I am a bit concerned about her emotional welfare but because she sometimes looks so sad as well and I think maybe she's just got too much on her little shoulders but that's maybe because I know some of the background as well she looks sad doesn't she

JH She does sometimes

Appendix 3: Example of conversation with child about books

Darren reads (graded reader and non-fiction text)

Transcript notes

This tape was intended as an aid to Darren's PLR Informal Reading Assessment. It was made in the middle of the afternoon towards the end of the Autumn Term. Darren has been in Reception for about ten weeks at this point. Darren and I sat alone, but visible in the side bay of the classroom. There is some background noise. Pages turn from time to time.

Darren (several words, inaudible)

JH It tells you it's it tells you it's recording. OK come and sit on this chair for me please Darren

Darren (inaudible)

JH Yes, it's a tape recorder darling (pause) OK now then (pause) I'm going to write the date there now I'm going to do you know what your book's called?

Darren The Bat in the Hat

JH Where does it? OK A Bat in a Hat right (pause) OK

Darren (reads) Bat and a hat

JH Have you read this book before?

Darren No

JH I think so (pause) I think you have

Darren No (pause)

JH OK

Darren (reads) The bat a bat

JH OK

Darren (reads) The bat an a hat d a h (letters)

JH That's very good

Darren (pointing to letter) That's a one isn't it with a dot? is that a

: letter a one and a dot?

JH Yes it's a letter do you know the letter?

Darren No ba (guessing letter)

JH Let's look at these words together shall we?

Darren It's some words

JH (helping D. to point) It says A .

Darren Ba ha

JH Bat

Darren and

JH in

Darren a moon

JH It looks as if it's in the moon doesn't it but look what it's got
on its head

Darren A hat a hat and a bat

JH Right OK it says A bat in a hat (D. joins in)

Darren A hat no a hat a bat it's not got it on now

JH No its hat's disappeared

Darren Is it magic or do you take it off?

JH I think he might have taken it off

Darren A hat an' a look a bat

JH Right what's the bat standing on Darren?

Darren A carpet

JH A mat

Darren A mat

JH It says a bat on a

Darren Carpet

JH Mmmmat

Darren Mat

JH It's a little carpet

Darren (pause) b a c u h aitch c ar mm r ca on a (might?)

JH It says A cat on a mat so I wonder where the bat's gone?

Darren A cat in a hat

JH A cat in a hat the cat's sitting in a hat isn't it? oh well done

Darren That's that's the end

JH That is the end isn't it?

Darren Yeah

JH OK now would you like to look at that insect book?

Darren Yeah

JH We'll go find it then cos it's under lots of books I'll just press the pause button

Darren Julia (inaudible)

JH I'll just help you with those in a sec OK I'm just going to write what this book's called can you guess what it's called?

Darren I think it's all about bugs nasty bugs and nice bugs

JH It's all about bugs? you're right it's all about insects yes

Darren (several inaudible words) Are them underground them underground aren't they? them spiders and scorpions an'

JH OK shall we begin at the beginning then?

Darren Yes here's beginning here's the page (pointing) what are them Julia?

JH It's got big horns that beetle hasn't it? I wonder what those are for?

Darren It's not a beetle

JH It's not a beetle?

Darren That beetles are black and they're wh- that's that's a beetle because it's black

JH I see that's a beetle because it's black

Darren Yeah

JH Do you think erm that's not a beetle because it's brown

Darren Yeah because it's (.) what are them Julia?

JH Those are horns on its head

Darren But they're movers

JH Yes they're snippers they're for snipping and nipping other

beetles

Darren Do they nip other bugs?

JH I think so, yes

Darren I think they nip people

JH No I don't think they nip people they're too small to nip people they'd be frightened and run away

Darren Spiders don't run away from me

JH What is it a spider that animal over there?

Darren No

JH How do you know?

Darren 'Cos it has big claws 'n spiders are only harmless bugs aren't they?

JH Spiders don't bite people not very many of them some big ones

Darren Do they bite you?

JH Some huge ones bite you yes

Darren Spiders don't I killed one it didn't bite me

JH No but it was a little one wasn't it?

Darren No (inaudible)

JH Some spiders are some spiders are as big as this
(demonstrating with hands)

Darren Spiders are

JH Let's turn the page and see what

Darren Spiders are only harmless bugs they can't hurt you they're only little all spiders are little

JH Do you think that one's a spider?

Darren Yeah

JH Is it?

Darren Yeah

JH Shall I tell you a secret?

Darren Yeah

JH Spiders have eight legs

Darren Do they?

JH And insects have six

Darren Do they?

JH So that one's got six so it's an insect

Darren But what kind of bug is it called? the spiders have

JH It's called I haven't got my glasses on it's called a giant ant

Darren Do spiders have more legs than insects?

JH They do and they weave webs and insects don't do that
(pause) what else can you see on that page?

Darren They only try to eat bugs don't they?

JH They only what?

Darren Eat bugs

JH They eat bugs yes they do

Darren They don't they don't really eat you do they?

JH No they don't eat you they're not interested in you eating
you because you're

Darren Skin

JH You're big and they're small

Darren What are them? (pointing)

JH Oh now those are interesting aren't they?

Darren Yeah

JH What do you think it says here?

Darren Dunno

JH It tells you about the parts of an insect here's one of its legs
look

Darren That might be-

JH Here's its wing

Darren That might be a skull of a crocodile

JH Does it look like the skull of a crocodile do you think?

Darren Yeah

JH Mm?

Darren Yeah it does

JH So where's its teeth?

Darren They might have fell out

JH Its teeth might have fallen out?

Darren Yeah what is that?

JH That's these are the inside parts of an insect these are all the parts that digest its food its guts where are your guts?

Darren Don't have any it's just it's just my blood

JH Just blood inside there is it?

Darren Yeah what are are them all underground them?

JH Er it says it tells you look that those let's see this heading at the top it says 'These are NOT insects' so there's the spider that I told you about so it's not an insect 'cos it's got eight legs

Darren (inaudible)

JH And here's a millipede

Darren It can't even how can that's a big one how can it eat you? it hasn't got it hasn't even got..

JH It can't eat you it can a great huge big one about this big

Darren Yeah?

JH Some spiders that live in Mexico and South Africa no sorry South America can bite you and they have poison in their teeth like snakes and that makes you poorly

Darren I know but but where but Mexico Mex-I-co Mex-I-co it's got all poison things

JH Has that got lots of poison things do you think?

Darren Yeah

JH Ah ah

Darren (inaudible) poison they've got poison scorpions they...

JH Scorpions have poison they do

Darren They sling their tails

JH They bite you with their tails don't they they stick their tails

into you some scorpions are only little

Darren And what do they do to you?

JH And some are big you know we've just said

Darren What do little scorpions do to you when they flick their tails?

JH They sting you

Darren Do they?

JH Yes

Darren What is that called? that (inaudible) that only has two legs

JH It's a stick insect you can keep those for pets

Darren Can you?

JH It looks like it's only got four legs look

Darren Does it stick to your hand?

JH No it looks like a stick when it's sitting on sticks it looks just like them so all other animals won't come and eat it.

Camouflage

Darren Is it?

JH Mmm

Darren Because (inaudible) sticks hard

JH Pardon?

Darren sticks hard eh?

JH Yes it sticks hard and the other animals can't don't know it's an animal they think it's a stick

Darren Do they?

JH Yeah

Darren (laughs) what do they do them wiggle?

JH Real? yeah there are real animals like that

Darren Them wiggle look they don't have any legs

JH That doesn't have any legs. no that one's got lots and lots and lots of legs

Darren Yeah does it have more as a spider?

JH Yes it does you can see can't you there's a spider look with one two three four five six seven eight legs and two

antennae and that one you can't count its legs it's got so many

Darren How many is on that one?

JH Can you count them?

Darren No I can't count them

JH Why not?

Darren Look at that big rock

JH Mmm

Darren Look at that look at that it's not even (inaudible) what do they do?

JH Ooh that's an interesting one isn't it?

Darren It's an interesting one isn't it?

JH It's got antlers has this beetle

Darren It might walk on its head

JH No I don't think so. you know what antennae are for that stick on their heads?

Darren Yeah

JH What

Darren Dunno

JH Well you just said you did didn't you you funny old thing.

No antennae

Darren Yeah?

JH are so that you can so that you can erm sense the air round you to see if it's cold or hot or if you bump into another animal

Darren Yeah?

JH you can use your antennae to find out what kind of animal it is and you can smell through your antennae as well

Darren What are them called them animals?

JH (reading) it's a moss weevil

Darren What's a moss weevil?

JH It tells you what moss weevils do here look see this bit of

writing here

Darren Yeah

JH That tells you about moss weevils

Darren What do they do moss weevils?

JH Well they live in moss I think it's got two lots of antennae
ooh look it's got a thing to bite with it says biting parts

Darren Do they bite you?

JH What people?

Darren No them (pointing)

JH It bites other it bites other moss weevils I think

Darren Does any other moss weevils bite them?

JH If it if it came across one it would yes

Darren Does it bite you?

JH Me personally? I've never met one

Darren I have

JH Have you where?

Darren (pause) Moss

JH In some moss?

Darren Yeah what happens in Mexico if you stand on them
poisoned spiders?

JH Can you guess?

Darren No

JH Suppose you stood on a poisoned spider and made it cross
what do you think it would do?

Darren Dunno anyway when-

JH What did I say they did?

Darren Them kill yer

JH They bite you don't they and they put poison in your blood
so it makes you very poorly

Darren Does it run with poison?

JH Yeah inside

Darren What colour's the poison?

JH I've no idea

Darren Might be blue because all poison is blue

JH Is it? why?

Darren D'you know what? my grandad's got blue poison

JH Has he?

Darren Yeah he put it on flowers so slugs don't eat them

JH Oh I know the one that you mean

Darren Yeah it kills slugs

JH Can you guess why it's blue?

Darren Because because that's how it's made

JH That's how it's made and it's made blue so people don't eat it

Darren Yeah

JH Shall we look on another page then?

Darren Flies

JH Flying ones yes

Darren What are them?

JH Those ones that eat leaves?

Darren Yeah

JH They're called caterpillars

Darren Aaah

JH and they're going to turn into butterflies

Darren Why does it turn into butterflies?

JH Cos it's like a baby butterfly it doesn't look like one much
does it?

Darren No. what do caterpillars eat then?

JH They eat leaves look can you see there's a picture of one
eating a leaf

Darren What do them do to you them them?

JH To people?

Darren Yeah

JH Nothing

Darren It might just be the body of them

JH Mmm?

Darren What is that what do them try to do to caterpillars?

JH Eat them I think

Darren But they'll turn into butterflies

JH Mmmm

Darren (gasps) What are them?

JH These are beetles that fight each other

Darren Do they?

JH Yeah

Darren Do they fight the little one?

JH I don't know but they fight each other. Look here's a picture of two of them fighting can you see these-

Darren Will that one fight its friend, that one?

JH Erm I don't know, maybe

Darren But what but what happens if people gone near of them? What would they do to you?

JH Nothing

Darren Nothing?

JH No they're only very small well they're about this big (with fingers)

Darren But why are they great big like that?

JH Pardon?

Darren Why are they great big like that?

JH They're shown as a big picture so that you can see all the different parts of them. they're shown big but really they're only about that big (with fingers)

Darren What are them?

JH These are it shows you how the larvae that's the caterpillars and those sorts of things turn into the proper insect they wrap themselves up in silk and then they stay there then out pops a butterfly or whatever

Darren Well are them the baby ones?

JH Yes

Darren What are them? what are them that climb up them?

JH Erm it's showing you how they turn. the chrysalis

Darren Yeah?

JH The animals come out of them. the insects come out of
them it says incomplete metamorphosis

Darren What are them?

JH Can you see them coming out of their chrysalis? look
they're creeping out can you see? leaving it behind

Darren What all of them?

JH Oh look your favourite beetles all different kinds of beetles
big ones little ones

Darren But aren't they the same as all th'others?

JH No they're not all the same there are all different kinds of
beetles this is about flies you know about flies don't you?

Darren Yeah I've seen them at home before you see them in the
summer

JH Yeah that's right you do

Darren What do them do to you? are them beetles?

JH They don't do anything much to you because they're little

Darren But they have big claws on them

JH Yes they have big claws on the front of their heads but
they're really very small

Darren The big claws?

JH Mmm I think we ought to stop now Darren because the
people will be coming to want to go to wash their hands
thankyou very much for talking to me about this book that
was very kind

Darren Look at that big (inaudible)

JH That's a kind of dragonfly that flies over water. are you
going to wash your hands for lunch?

Darren What are them called?

JH I can't see Stephen Island something or other that I can't see

Darren What are them? what are them called?

JH Off you go for your lunch quick. do you want to miss your lunch? no

Darren What are them?-

JH (several words inaudible) put them in the bag

Darren What are them called? what are them called Julia?

Appendix 4: Children's questionnaire

(questionnaire)

Michael and Emma's Questionnaire

girl
boy



1 How much do you like reading to a grown-up?



2 How much do you like reading to yourself?



3 How much do you like writing a story?



4 How much do you like drawing a picture?



5 How much do you like watching television?

Appendix 5: Example of children's interview (questionnaire)

Michael and Emma Questionnaire

Transcript notes

Made to support 'How much do you like?' questionnaire. Children's voices easy to differentiate. Tape made towards end of afternoon. Place one level down from noisy classroom. Nearby swing door in constant use by Year 2 children.

Classroom chosen because children more relaxed in own surroundings, in spite of disadvantages of noise.

Conventions

(.) brief pause

(my dad) transcript uncertain, a guess

() unclear speech, not able to transcribe

{can I

{this is mine overlapping speech

JH OK I've got some papers here with smiley faces

Emma Yeah

JH And I wondered if you'd fill them in for me

Emma Mmm mmm

JH Can you see some of the faces are happy

Emma Ah ah

JH Some are (.) well quite happy some don't care (.) that one's

Emma Sad

JH Cross or sad and that one's very cross or sad

Emma OK

So (.) there's one for you Jodie (.) OK (.) and here's one for you Michael (.) now we've done this before (.) but there's lots of people all about as you can see running up and down and making a noise so can you talk in fairly loud voices please

Emma Yeah

JH Right (.) the game is that these are all in a row (.) and I'm going to ask you a question (.) about how much you like things and I don't want you to pretend (.) I want you to really tell me how you feel about it (.) OK(.) here's a pen for you

Michael Thankyou

JH Pen for you

Emma Thankyou

JH OK

Michael How do you do the top?

JH I can take the top off

Emma I've done mine ooo put it on the bottom?

JH Yeah

Michael Oh like that

JH Now (.) first question it says wait a minute it says how much do you like reading to a grown up before you do anything talk to me about it

Emma Erm I like it a lot

JH You like it a lot (.) why

Emma Because my my sister always reads the ones I like

JH Does she read to you or do you read to her Emma?

Emma She reads to me

- JH Who do you read to?
- Emma I read to my little sister
- JH How old is she?
- Emma Four
- JH She's four
- Michael My sister's four too
- JH Ah ah who do you read to Michael?
- Michael Mmm my uncle
- JH Ah ah
- Michael He came from Australia the other day
- JH Did he?
- Michael Mmm
- JH So you read a story to him
- Michael (pointing) He's in that class
- JH Is he?
- Michael But he's grown up now (.) he met Mrs. M. and said hello
- JH Oh he knows Mrs. M. does he?
- Michael Yes because that was his teacher
- JH Fancy that (.) so you read to your uncle (.) who else do you read to?
- Michael My sister I learn how to
- JH Just turn that way a bit
- Michael I like to read to I like to learn her to read stuff I keep doing (red) tricky (books) and she copies them and does them very well
- JH Does she? OK so (.) if you think you like that a lot where are

you going to put your tick?

Michael Mmm

JH The very smiley face?

Michael Yeah

JH Are you Emma?

Emma Yeah

JH OK then (.) put a tick on the very smiley face (.) OK now then (.) it says how much do you like reading to yourself?

Michael I like it a very lot

JH Tell me about it

Michael Well when I read to myself it I can learn things more better and it makes the (.) makes me feel like I am I am going I'm reading a map

JH Mmm you read maps do you?

Michael Mmm I always read maps to (.) the ones that my mum makes and writes (.) and the b (.) when I read some of the books I get a bit tricky so

JH Mmm

Michael I erm always er try to think what they're like

JH Mmm

Michael And I er have to spell them out

JH I see

Michael So I go (.) l(.)oo(.)k and it spelt look

JH Did it? (.) Do you read comics at home?

Michael Mmm

JH What kind?

Michael Oh er I like reading engine ones that someone give me

JH Mmm

Michael The doctor (wardrobe) you know the doctor

JH Yeah

Michael And there's I like reading the biggest train books

JH Yeah

Michael Cos they've got loads of pages and my uncle reads them at night with me

JH Ah ah

Michael They've got steam engine trains and diesel engines

JH Ooh I like trains

Michael And but when I read them a lot it makes me feel like I'm on a real engine

JH You can pretend can you?

Michael Yeah

JH What about you Jodie?

Emma I don't like it reading on my own because Katie always comes up and bothers me when I'm trying to learn the first letter

JH Does she?

Emma Yeah

JH Your little sister bothers you

Emma Yeah

JH Ah ah

Emma And and when I try to do the other one she keeps erm pulling on my back and hitting me

JH I see (.) so you don't like reading by yourself much at all

Emma No

- JH Mmm (.) so where you going to put your tick?
- Emma There
- JH No that's the smiley one you're going to put the one you don't like doing (.) is it this one you're putting a tick on?
- Emma Mmm'mmm
- JH You put it on it then (.) that's it (.) but Michael does like it so he's going to put his on it (.) that's right well done next how much do you like writing a story?
- Emma I like it I like it a lot because () you need to make up words and Katie doesn't come up and bother me because I always I always shut the door when I try to do it
- JH I see
- Emma Cos I'm pretending I'm in the big class and I'm pretending that I'm doing real science
- JH You're doing oh you're pretending you're doing real science
- Emma Yeah
- JH Ah so (.) what about when you're at school do you like reading a story at school write a story do you like writing stories at school?
- Emma Yeah because it looks dead grown-up see and no little ones kids little girls aren't allowed in our class they're just big ones
- JH Yes and can I will the grown-ups help you?
- Emma They don't because I've got I I always erm do bc's for the grown-ups and (you know) write the first story for them and then they've got to make a new sentence of er one of the sentences and they don't even know what letter it starts with
- JH Oh don't they (.) what about you Michael do you like writing (.) stories?
- Michael Erm sometimes I forget about them and sometimes I think about them then I just race upstairs to get some folded paper like that
- JH Yeah

Michael and stick it in the in one and then stick it in the other stick it in the other and then I write in it and draw the pictures (.) I do train books a lot

JH You write train books ah ah

Michael Yeah

JH What about at school?

Michael Mmm I like drawing pictures of them

JH Do you?

Michael Yeah

JH Mmm ah well we're going to talk about that in a minute(.) what about writing though

Michael Mmm writing that's my favourite I do that a lot at home

JH What about school?

Michael Mm I do that a lot too I do it here a lot

JH As well?

Michael Mmm

JH OK right (.) so where you going to put your ticks?

Emma {In that

Michael {There

JH OK

Emma I've got three of these

JH {Put your tick ()

Emma {I've done a big one

JH Never mind OK and are you going to put your writing one as well?

Emma No

JH Yeah (.) next question how much do you like drawing

pictures?

Michael Oh I love that

JH OK then put your smiley one tell me about drawing pictures

Michael Well I love drawing ships and that lot

JH Yes

Michael So I (just like) drawing ships and trains and carriages and cars

JH I see

Michael The trains where they pull all the luggage and the carriages
where they erm where they bring them to the s the boat

JH I see

Michael And the and the car where they erm take it on the ship if they
want to

JH Those are special kinds of pictures aren't they?

Michael Yeah

JH Do you like drawing pictures Emma?

Emma Yeah I like erm doing it a lot I like drawing me like with long
hair a bit curly

JH Yes

Emma and on a bike

JH I see (.) OK then you'd better put a tick by your smiley then
hadn't you

Michael I have

JH You have already Myles mmm (.) I know the answer to
this question (.) how (.) much (.) do (.) you (.) like watching

Emma {Telly

Michael {Telly

Michael Oh I really love that

JH Do you what do you love what do you like to watch?

Michael I like to watch Jack Frost

JH Mmm mmm Jack Frost what's that?

Michael It's about a snowman {and it comes to life

Emma {snowman

Michael when a little boy {()

Emma {I've seen it he gets real

JH Oh dear

Michael {That's my favourite

Emma {and he gets fell over gets melted

JH That's your favourite do you have videos?

Michael Yeah

JH What kind?

Michael Well I got (.) Superman

JH Yes

Michael And I got Thomas three Thomas's but the er other one's broken when (.) it blew up in the er taperecorder so we had to get a new a new tape so I could put my videos in

JH But not the tape recorder it didn't blow up?

Michael No

JH Ah ah what about you Emma (.) what do you like to see?

Emma Er I like to watch the (Power) Pop Girls

Michael Shall I just er?

JH Yes

Emma I like to watch the Power Pop Girls because they always make my

JH The Power Pop Girls?

Emma Yeah it's them they fight crime and it means that erm they erm they live in towns alright

JH Yes

Emma and when when he says {oh no erm a monster's coming

Michael {what do we have to do with this

JH Just a minute Michael

Emma And a monster's coming and when the monster comes they all have to fight the monsters (.) it always {() that

JH {That's the Power Pop Girls is it?

Emma Yes

JH Do you have videos

Emma Yes

Michael {I've seen a

Emma {Yeah I've got the little mermaid

JH Yes

Emma and I've got (.) erm Tommy and Chucky where they go on a hunt and and they get and their mammy gets it's it's a new tape and there's Tommy and Chucky find a new baby in the and they go in this erm (.) baby room where the baby's lying and they have a look around at the babies to see if they're going to get the new baby and they think the new baby is in there but they're not

JH They're not?

Emma Yeah and they get lost (.) 'cos they're pretending they're going on a hunt

JH I see (.) well that sounds very interesting so are have you put your tick in your very smiley then?

Emma Which one's smiley?

Michael The best

JH Alright she was just looking for it weren't you? That's lovely
that's very helpful

Michael Now do we listen to it?

JH No I'm afraid not cos we haven't got time this afternoon (.)
sorry

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